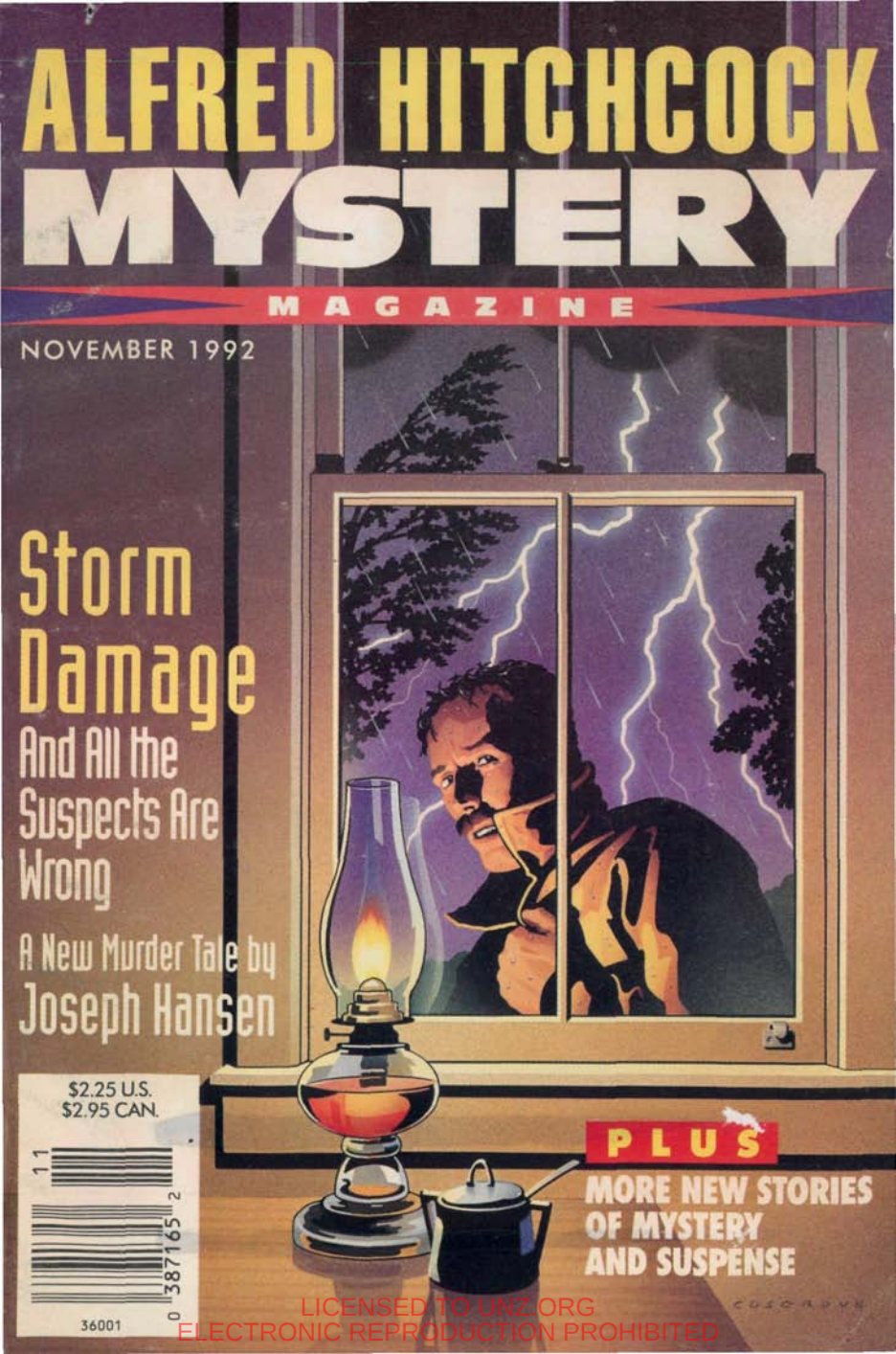
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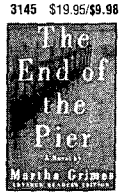
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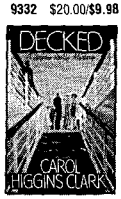
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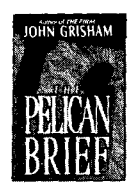
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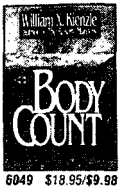
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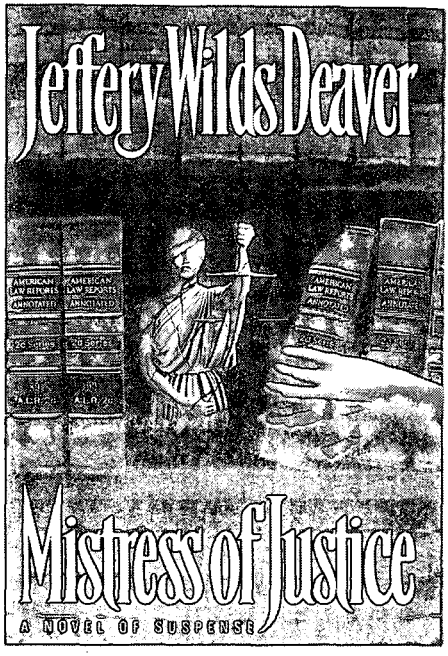
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EDITOR'S NOTES

by Cathleen Jordan

Every once in a while (and it's been a while since the last time), we use this space to try to turn up some potential Mysterious Photographs from our readers. You send us stories (some of you), which we read and buy if they are suitable for our pages. But very few of you think to send us photographs.

Our readers probably don't realize (we surmise) that we are always in the market for those, too. That we would enjoy getting them. That it would be fun for us to print them.

We just know you have a camera.

Those of you who have been reading the magazine for a few months at least will have a pretty good idea of the kind of thing we use. In brief, a photograph should have a quality of mystery about it and the capacity to inspire a story. It should make you ask yourself what is really going on here? It should be fun to mull over.

What don't we want? Anything too grisly, of course, including photographs of real crime or accident scenes. And we can't use photos of identifiable people without their permission (they might turn out to be murderers, for instance, in The Story That Won, and they just might take exception to that).

So get that camera out—but when you've come up with something, please do *not* send us the actual photo. We need to see a nonreturnable photocopy instead. We prefer black and white pictures, of course, but we can make do with color

(continued on page 113)

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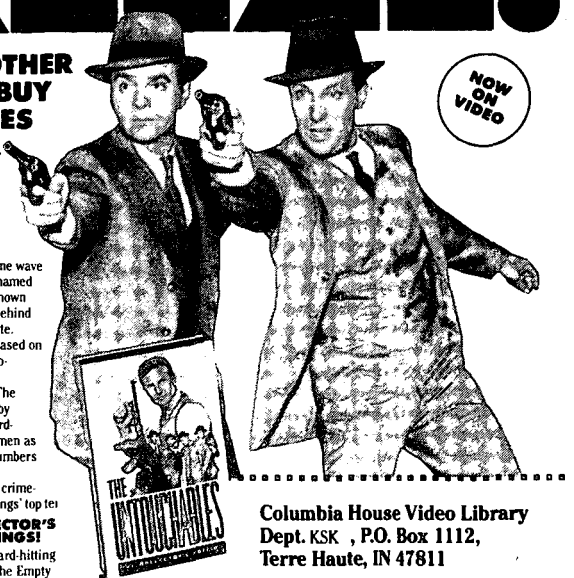
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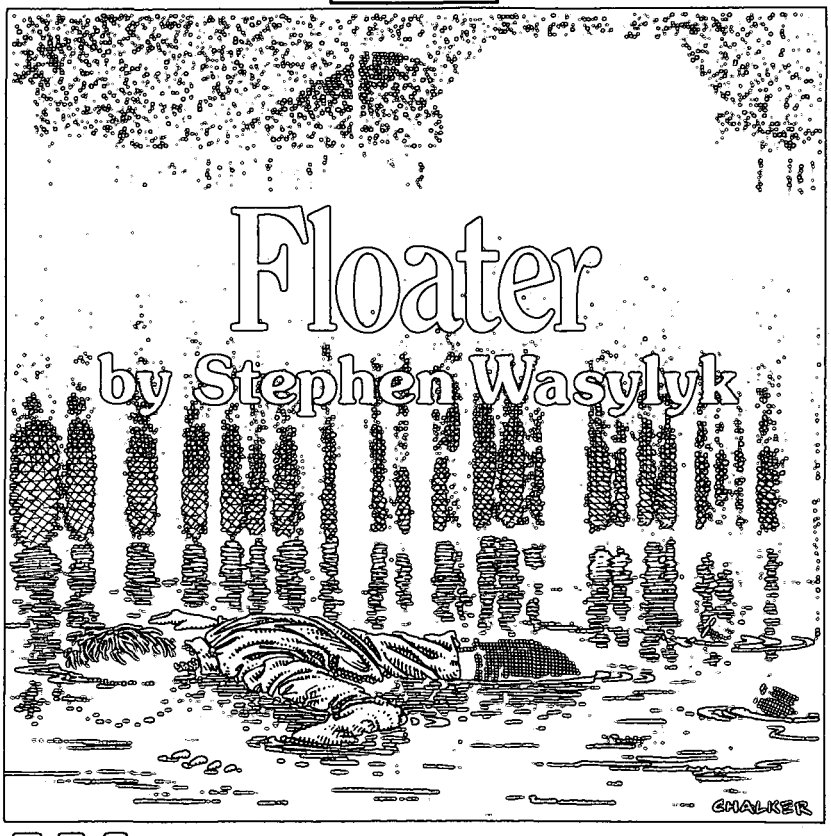
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When that harsh bell in those good old phones jangled in the middle of the night, two rings were enough to jerk you upright, hands trembling, sweat on your brow, and murder in your heart when you heard a drunk in a bar mumble, *Ish thish Delores?*

Nothing like the electronic trilling of these new ones. Lord knows how long it had been chirping before it wakened me. My wife slept on, probably dreaming she was listening to an exotic new species of songbird.

Hazlett Anatole Sherwood's voice was audible before the handpiece reached my ear. "Jonesy? Get down to Pier 19. They're fishing Fingers Castellano out of the river."

Illustration by Steve Chalker

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I'd have preferred the drunk and Delores. "Wha—?"

"Fingers Castellano. Someone killed him," he said impatiently.

I propped one eye open to look at the clock. "So? It's three in the morning. He isn't going anywhere. I'll look into it after breakfast."

There was a small silence.

"Jonesy," he said softly, "it's *Fingers!* I owed him!"

That he did. The huge plurality from Fingers' district had made him D.A., but that wasn't the only reason he was calling and we both knew it.

"Don't get nervous," I said.

"Get down there!"

Click. I sighed and snapped on the light.

Louise opened her eyes. "What now?"

"Sherwood." I rolled out of bed. "Duty calls."

"You should have retired instead of listening to him. Can't run the place without you, best investigator in the D.A.'s office. You lapped it up like cream whip on apple pie."

She closed her eyes and snuggled deeper. I dressed, bent over, and kissed her goodbye. Not too long ago she'd have been up, coffee made, walking me to the door, but a spine ravaged by arthritis and subtle lifetime injuries made getting out of bed a painful experience her pride preferred to keep solitary whenever possible. *I creak more when you watch.*

The years seem to extract more of a toll from the good than the bad.

I walked out to my car; a fashion plate in suede cap and jacket, green turtleneck, fawn slacks and white walkers. Except that fashion plates were never five ten, two hundred and twenty. They also had enough hair to stuff a mattress. Trimming off what I had left wouldn't warm up a barber's clippers.

She kept pushing retirement, and I kept resisting. There's a piece of me she doesn't know, even after thirty-five years. Oh, I'd have enough to keep me busy so that I wouldn't sit on a bench watching the balance of my years slip by—but the only thing I was *really good at* was what I did. Not just pride on my part. Doing anything else would be a waste of time that would make me doubt my reason for being.

I owed him, Sherwood had said. True.

Without those votes from Fingers' multiethnic, blue collar river district, his name would have been only one of a half dozen on a heavyweight bond letterhead. It now gleamed alone in golden gothic splendor on the door of the

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D.A.'s private office, the only one from the opposition party to grace that polished oak in twenty years. Of course, if he'd been listed on the letterhead instead of the door, he'd be making a great deal more money, but money is more important to some men than to others.

Fingers acquired his name from performing a magic act at kids' parties when he'd been young. Even after he'd become a political bigwig, he'd put on an occasional performance. Among other tricks, those long, supple fingers could make soft sponge rubber balls appear and disappear with amazing ease, a talent he'd transferred to votes, swinging elections for twenty years and giving himself virtual lifetime tenure in City Council. Political sleight-of-hand notwithstanding, he'd been beloved like many a scoundrel, and his constituents would be very angry to learn he was dead. That wrath would descend on the head of the D.A. if the assailant wasn't drawn and quartered within twenty-four hours, because Sherwood had been elected as a crime-busting breath of fresh air in a too-long bumbling and inept D.A.'s office. Merely a hint of incompetence would tarnish that image. The politicos who felt betrayed by Fingers' defection could easily supply that hint by browbeating the police into hemming and hawing and dragging their feet. No one in officialdom except Sherwood owed Fingers any extra effort.

I had to keep Sherwood in the game without stepping on anyone's toes because enmities created by making others look bad die hard.

Pier 19 was almost as bright as City Hall, where spotlights ran up a huge electric bill nightly illuminating only arches and gargoyles, the darkness blanketing the workings of city government remaining impenetrable.

Docked on one side, a huge freighter loomed high enough to be lost in the night. Halfway down the vacant slip on the other was a knot of cars, a blue and white emergency wagon, a half-dozen people in one group and about a dozen spectators standing in the open doorway of the shed that ran down the center.

I clipped my badge to my jacket and joined the small group. Except for the assistant M.E. kneeling by the body, they stood as though waiting for something to happen—or to be told what to do by the tall black woman standing apart.

She was slim, hair cropped

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short, long skirt brushing boots, her hands thrust deep into the pockets of a loose jacket over a white blouse.

Wide, intelligent eyes glinted with humor. "The cavalry has arrived."

They all chuckled. No fools, they. When Sergeant Alice Follet said something funny, you laughed. When she said something sad, you cried. When she yelled, you headed for the nearest exit.

Fingers Castellano would do none of those things ever again. Now nothing more than a mass of sodden clothing, he'd been a small, squeaky-voiced man, his bony face with its puttylike nose the kind you'd take lightly when you first met him because Hollywood and TV had brainwashed the country into believing that local political powerhouses were all fat, bald, smoked cigars, and spoke in a vibrant baritone.

I jerked my head at her and we walked to the end of the pier, the black river making sucking, gurgling noises below us. Upstream, a necklace of lights outlining the bridge soared in a gentle arc that mirrored itself in the water.

"A man who'd been on his high school swim team doesn't drown, Alice."

"No one said he did. It was a blow to the base of the skull."

"Karate chop?"

"The bruise it left says not. The autopsy may pin it down. I've already alerted the M.E."

Even in death, a politician gets instant service. "Who found him?"

"One of the longshoremen loading the freighter took a smoke break, flipped his butt into the water, and saw him float into the lights. If the freighter didn't have to be out by dawn, the body would be well on its way to the Atlantic."

"How long has he been dead?"

"First guess, four hours or so."

A half mile away, the lights on the far bank clustered together as if seeking warmth from the cold breeze.

"Between the current and the outgoing tide—"

She turned to look at the bridge. "Under it or close to it, I thought."

"Maybe he jumped. Hit his head on a piece of debris."

She smiled. "Know anyone dumb enough to buy Castellano as a suicide?" The smile faded and the voice picked up an edge. "You taking over?"

I understood her resentment. The department could preach about equal opportunities for women, but she'd been a sergeant far too long.

"Hell, no. As much as he'd

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like to, Sherwood can't push Homicide aside. Any gossip that Fingers stepped on a mob toe or two, injured the feelings of the controlled substance fraternity, or was spending time in a bed other than his own?"

"Fingers being Fingers, select any of the above."

They were lifting the body into the emergency wagon.

"Have they notified his wife?"

"I quote Chief of Detectives Rossiter. 'We'll leave it to you. Might be easier coming from a woman.' "

Uh-huh. Also easier to come in later with expressions of sympathy.

"His wife knows me. Like me to come along?"

I could sense her relax. "I don't care what they say about you, Jonesy. You're a man of sensitivity and refinement."

"We'll take my car. Someone can drive yours back to the station."

I slid through a red light. "How are the boys doing at the university?"

"They'd both better be doing damned well."

I chuckled. "You've become a stereotypical mother."

"Always have been. That's why they are where they are." She let a little silence build before breaking it. "I don't like being pushed aside."

"No reflection on you, Alice. Part of the game. Because Fingers went against the party nominee to get Sherwood elected, leaving the investigation in the hands of a lowly detective-sergeant would make it appear revenge for his defection. Poor politics. No matter how they feel, they've got to put on a good show by bringing in the big guns. Otherwise, the media will harp and scarp about why it isn't being handled at the highest level, as if that would make a difference."

"What made Castellano buck the party?"

I ran another light. "Once, during an argument, Olsen called him a dumb dago who had stepped out of line. Fingers could have called him a blockheaded Swede and let it go, but he didn't. When they nominated Olsen for D.A., Fingers allowed him to slip through the primary, then had his people register everyone in the district who could breathe, and probably some who couldn't. On election day, he had them pull Sherwood's lever to show Olsen how dumb the dago was. In a close race, those votes made the difference."

"Maybe Olsen killed him," she said drily.

"Nah. Politicians prefer to destroy each other with lies

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and innuendo." Tough and smart she might be, but the expensive fragrance wafting across my nose said she was still all woman. I grinned. "Another factor. Digging into the life of a politician could turn up something so embarrassing it could offend the delicate sensibilities of a female detective-sergeant."

Her laugh was rich and velvety. "They should put you in charge, Jonesy. A comedian investigating the death of a magician would make *Nightline.*"

On both sides of the silent street, so narrow that cars parked only along one curb, the houses were unbroken walls of red brick. A small flight of marble steps marked the entrance to each home. Fingers could have moved to a single one long ago, but he still lived in the house he'd grown up in that his father had bought for two thousand dollars. Current price —over a hundred and fifty thousand. The blank, unimposing exteriors were misleading. Behind many, designers had gutted the six-room interiors and installed niceties like circular staircases, window walls at the rear, and balconies that looked out on miniature gardens—some of their efforts in making each square inch of space count appearing in architectural magazines. Stepping inside was like opening a battered sack and finding diamonds.

I rode the car up onto the sidewalk several doors away from where windows glowed yellow. "Don't slam the door. Looks like Rosetta is still up. I don't want her to know we're here until we get a little help."

I mounted the steps and held the bell down for a long time. Eventually I heard a heavy voice cursing; the light over the stoop came on, and the door cracked a few inches.

"Gil Jones, Tony," I said. "Let me in."

The man who stepped back had wide shoulders and a big stomach, his gray hair wild. He wore a white T-shirt and pajama bottoms, his feet bare. He examined us. A mind fogged by sleep finally cleared, and he stiffened. "It's Fingers, isn't it, Jonesy? Rosetta's been calling all over because he's always home by midnight or she knows why."

"Fished out of the river. Marie better be there when she's told."

"Jesus." He passed a hand over his face. "Oh my God."

"Talk to Him later, Tony. Get Marie."

He ran his hand over his face again and stumbled up the stairs. I heard voices, a gasp,

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a little scream, and Tony came down again.

"What happened, Jonesy?"

"We don't know yet. At the moment, it looks like someone hit him and dropped him in the river. Tomorrow you'll have more cops asking questions around here than you can count. I'd like you to spread the word. For me. Everyone who saw Fingers last night. Where and with whom. All right?"

He nodded. "Sure. You'll get it, Jonesy."

"Not me." I nodded at Alice. "She'll pass it on."

The stocky woman who came down the stairs was wearing a shimmering pink robe and fluffy slippers, her blue hair up in plastic curlers. Immediately behind her was a much older and shrunken edition with tight, clamped lips, similarly outfitted, who glared at me for coming in out of the night with news of death.

The younger woman's eyes glistened. "Is it true, Jonesy?"

"It's true, Marie. She'll need your help."

She sobbed and pulled her robe tighter. The old woman punched Tony on the arm and said, "You. When somebody is a-die, you calla the priest."

I'd been hoping to get both Marie and her mother. Between the two, the mother, having seen death many times, would be of more help.

She tottered along as we went down the steps and mounted those of the house with the glowing windows. As I thought, all the soundproofing and insulation installed by the architects couldn't keep Rosetta's scream from waking the entire street.

Within the hour, the reins had been taken over by Rossiter, who looked at me suspiciously while thanking us and telling Alice half apologetically that he knew she'd understand. What we all understood was that cracking a case with the publicity this one would generate meant sure promotion, but she was frozen out.

I bought Alice breakfast at the three-table deli down the street from the station. "Enjoy your bagel," I said. "There's a phrase—information developed outside the police investigation—that fits in here."

"Tony," she said.

I nodded. "His neighborhood. He'll turn up more in an hour than Rossiter's squad will in a day. Your job is to find out what the autopsy shows. I could put in a formal request, but that will take a few days and I don't want it to look as though the D.A. doesn't trust the police."

She smiled. "Does he?"

"Every elected official suffers from paranoia when dealing

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with a bureaucracy. It's worse when he doesn't belong to the party in power."

"Where does that leave you?"

"A humble servant of the law walking down the middle and seeking only truth unvarnished by political expediency," I said.

Sherwood tented his manicured fingers, didn't like that pose, passed a hand over his dark, wavy hair and placed one hand flat on his desk while supporting his ultra masculine square jaw with the other, didn't approve of that one either, and finally folded his arms and settled back in his chair.

"You look like you've just come from a geriatric golf tournament. Go home and put on a suit. We have a meeting at ten. The mayor, Rossiter, Police Commissioner Halsey, with their aides, of course. Me, Arlo Johnson as first assistant, and you. Will we have anything to contribute?"

I shrugged. "Attentive ears."

"Can I assume you've taken some measure to protect my interests?"

"You can assume that there is more than one way to skin a cat."

"Don't say that where someone can hear you. Good excuse for the opposition to turn pet lovers loose on me."

Louise was doing fine. Only those first stiffened minutes in the morning really bothered her—or that she admitted bothered her—but the doctor had stated very bluntly that a wheelchair was in her future. Not pleasant for someone who'd been moving at top speed since learning to crawl.

I told her about Fingers while changing.

"I liked him," she said. "His smile didn't look as though it was pasted on. How did such a nice man become a politician?"

"He took the wrong turn in the road somewhere."

"Why would anyone want to kill him?"

"Maybe because his smile didn't look as though it was pasted on."

"I never heard of anyone being killed for being sincere."

"In some political circles, that's the strongest of motives."

"It has to be some sort of accident."

"Accident victims are generally found at the scene, Louise. A body floating in the river indicates malice aforethought."

As always, the meeting was a waste of time, called only to give the politicos the opportunity to preen before the press.

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Sherwood, of course, dominated, since he was taller than the others, better looking, more articulate, and the darling of the female reporters, which meant he'd also dominate all the newscasts. Exactly what the others wanted. If the days slid by, the city would be asking, "What's the D.A. doing?" I had a mental image of certain men hinting to certain members of the press of some sort of nefarious connection between Fingers and Sherwood. How else could he have been elected? Perhaps there was a *reason* why the perpetrator hadn't been apprehended yet, know what I mean?

Wading through the paperwork on my desk without dozing was difficult under ordinary circumstances. Three hours' sleep made it impossible.

A titter woke me. Grace Weatherill, gray wig, baggy suit on a fireplug body, and enormous fashionable glasses, was smiling down at me.

"Getting too old for bedroom gymnastics, Jonesy?"

The acknowledged Queen of the Double Entendre and Sexual Innuendo slipped a paper under my nose. "Sign. It's the authorization for Ortiz's promotion."

When Grace said to sign, you signed. "Where's Sherwood?"

"Featured speaker at a sheet metal contractors' luncheon."

"What does that have to do with law enforcement?"

"Since when does the D.A. have anything to do with law enforcement?"

She waddled out.

I called Alice Follet.

"Talk about being pushed aside," she said. "I've never felt so unloved and unwanted." A good sense of humor can really blunt life's little darts.

"Opportunities for fame are limited. Why should they hand one to you? Look at it this way. Sneaking around gathering information is more fun than wearing out shoe leather. Have you conned anything out of anyone yet?"

"The M.E.'s preliminary report was just forwarded to Rossiter. No water in his lungs. When he hit the river, he was already dead from a blow to the base of the skull from an object about an inch wide. Straight across. Hard to do by hitting him. First guess is he fell or was run down by a vehicle, but what's puzzling them is there are no other bruises."

"Anything else?"

"They also found a few pieces of gravel in one shoe, and the harbor police agree the body had to go in somewhere close to the bridge to be found where it was."

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"Let's wrestle with that for awhile. Call me if Tony shows up."

The only image that popped into my mind was the victim being clubbed while kneeling—like before a headsman's axe. Maybe we were supposed to think that Fingers had been mugged, but someone had goofed by hitting him the wrong way—

Hell, I was getting as paranoid as Sherwood. If Fingers died as the result of a conspiracy, I'd have to see it to believe it. Conspirators require above-average intelligence, guts, the ability to lie undetected, and an inborn sleaziness and amorality. Try finding a cabal with all of those abilities. Machiavellis don't grow on trees.

Always start with the simplest solution. Louise might yet win the Crime Analyst of the Year Award, if the body's presence in the river could be explained.

That problem was sitting in the back of my mind like a weight as I worked my way through A.D.A. requests for investigative assistance, when Alice called again.

"Tony was in. The last person to talk to Fingers was Nguyen Tihn. He wanted Fingers' help with a problem his restaurant has with licenses and inspections. Fingers left about nine thirty, telling him he had to see someone at ten. Last seen three blocks away, walking north on Second."

"Couldn't have been going far. Fingers was a true city resident. He'd drive if Rosetta asked him to pick up a loaf of bread at the deli around the corner. I'll get back to you."

I looked up at the huge map of the city pinned to the wall, found Pier 19, and tracked back to the bridge, reaching into memories of the neighborhood for a possible destination. At that hour the businesses would have been closed except for the few bars and little stores and restaurants like Nguyen's, and if he'd been in any of those, Tony would have turned that up. Fingers hadn't ended in a public place.

Through the glass partition, Kubik, the only one in at the moment, stared at me as if he had something on his mind. I crooked a finger.

He bustled in. Kubik always bustled, even when he stood still.

"Got a minute? Something personal, not business. Know that new waterfront redevelopment? I've been thinking of putting my name down for one of the condos if it goes through, but you know these things sometimes go sour after they're built. I thought that since

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you've seen a lot of them come and go I'd ask you what your opinion is of this one."

I was flattered that he thought I was that smart, but I never stuck my neck out giving advice.

"You're a trained investigator. Find out if there is any good solid money behind it from a local bank that doesn't wheel, deal, and fly high. If one of those has money in it, the least you can do is break even."

He grinned and lifted two fingers to his forehead. "Gotcha."

I handed him one of the requests. "This will teach you to stay away from the boss. Lisa Halpern's been handling the complaints on the two con artists working center city. Go help her out."

My fingers drummed the desk thoughtfully as I watched him disappear.

Decades of pollution had once made the river a running sewer. No fish, no swimming, and when the wind was right, a smell bad enough to topple Godzilla. It had been gradually cleaned up, bringing back the fish, a fair chance you wouldn't acquire a loathsome disease if you fell in, and waterfront redevelopment. The project he was interested in featured a fancy marina and luxury condos. If *he* could afford one, it had better be because a wealthy aunt had passed away and left him her fortune, otherwise I'd be watching him very closely.

I finished penning assignments on the requests, thinking that it was possible a violent crime somewhere had been solved by someone sitting at a desk but I'd never been that lucky. I called Alice.

"Can you meet me at Walnut and Riverfront in half an hour?"

"You have the rank. How can I refuse?"

"Because it's a request, not an order."

"Then make it an order to cover me."

"Get your rear end over there."

"Thank you, sir," she said.

Not more than fifty yards south of the bridge, Walnut dead ended into Riverfront, which was as good a place as any to start figuring out where Fingers had been. Two minutes after I parked, Alice pulled open my door and joined me.

"What's on your mind?"

"I thought we'd cruise around. See if we might puzzle out where Fingers had been going."

"I have an idea why he walked," she said. "If it had been farther from Nguyen's to

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his car than to where he was going and if he'd been sure that whoever he was going to see would drive him home—"

"Possible."

"But wouldn't he be more inclined to tell someone to come to his house? That street was a traffic jam almost every night. What would take him out that late?"

I thought for a moment. "Only two things come to mind. An important meeting or a good friend."

"An important meeting up here?"

"You'd be amazed at where important meetings are held, especially when the participants don't want anyone to know they're taking place. We'll run down Riverfront, come back on First, and down again on Second. If neither of us has a flash of genius, we'll hit the east-west streets."

Riverfront, I suppose, was like every other waterfront street in the world—pier and sheds along the river, a small building tucked in between them here and there, railroad tracks, aprons for semis to be loaded and unloaded by cranes and container lifts, the cobblestoned street itself, the other side a lineup of buildings dark with age; all once churning with activity but now dirty and deteriorated, only a few of the piers and the businesses still active. All to be replaced by the marina and Kubik's luxury condos.

It went downhill from there. Leveling the area could only be an improvement. Twenty minutes later, after a tour that would never make any visitor's "Must-Take" list, I'd decided I'd had another great idea that was the equivalent of the Edsel. Not the first time nor the last, a philosophical view of no help to Sherwood at all.

I nosed out of a small street into Riverfront to take Alice back to her car, looked up and saw the building and the name I'd missed the first time around, and used a few choice words that raised Alice's eyebrows.

I'd forgotten that the redevelopment area ran from the bridge south into Fingers' district where a great many small homes paid off long ago and incorporating every improvement known to man would be leveled. The price the people would get would just about make a down payment on another and saddle them with big mortgages and higher taxes. The young ones might be able to handle it. The elderly ones wouldn't.

Up here, some of the businesses still operating would receive a fat moving bonus, a new

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site, and low-interest loans to rebuild. Lawyers for the others would negotiate settlements worth far more than the business. The high rollers at redevelopment always explained that whatever piddling millions were wasted would be more than made up for by new revenues.

Fingers had been in the middle. No matter which side he came down on, someone on the other just might be mad enough to kill. Rumor had him leaning toward the homeowners. Made sense. They contributed votes. All the businessmen could contribute was cash. No politician sneers at cash, but Fingers knew that when the polls closed, no one counted dollars.

Alice disrupted my train of thought. "I assume your colorful language has some significance?"

I leveled a finger at the building across the street. The first line of a sign said SPICER CO., INC., the smaller one beneath, NEW AND USED MATERIALS-HANDLING EQUIPMENT SOLD, BOUGHT, LEASED.

Crammed between two large, vacant ones, it was one story brick; a half dozen cars alongside in a parking lot that had once been gravelled but was now rutted and almost bare; the lot protected by a high mesh fence. The side facing the river featured a low brick wall. Extending the fence across it would have been a waste of money. Thieves would need commando training and a flotilla to invade from that side.

She craned for a better look. "The gravel in his shoe?"

"And more. Remember what I said about going to see a good friend? Spicer and Fingers have been bosom buddies since grade school. Let's drop in on his old schoolyard chum."

I pulled into the lot, and we wandered out to the brick wall. Beyond, a weed-grown bank fell steeply into the brown water. Right in front of us, crushed weeds indicated something had slid down the bank.

"Oh-oh," said Alice softly. "We'll need a photo of that and a sample of the gravel."

"Can they identify gravel?"

"If they can identify itty-bitty things like DNA, why not?"

"Hey!"

The man in the brown slacks and shortsleeved shirt glaring at us looked rugged enough to material-handle anything his equipment could.

"Hello, Spicer," I said.

His head thrust forward as he peered against the glare from the water. He grinned and came toward us, hand outstretched. "Jonesy!"

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"You know Sergeant Follet?"

He smiled at her. "I've heard of her. What are you doing here?"

"You know Fingers was found in the river last night?"

The pain on his face was clear. "Oh, yeah. Jeez, man, nobody is talking about anything else. You know that Fingers and I went way back."

"Maybe you can give us a little help. Let's go inside and talk."

"Sure." He led us through a large door, threading his way among a variety of manually operated and battery powered jacks and forklifts of all sizes, a couple being worked on by two coveralled men. Neat stacks of other equipment gleamed in the shadowy background.

Interested eyes taking it all in, Alice almost walked into a fork that had been left thigh-high, saved by my hand at the last moment. Bang into one of those and you'll limp for a month. She smiled her thanks, and we followed him through an office where two women were working. His overlooked the river. The walls were paneled in walnut, lights in the dropped ceiling giving off a soft illumination. He slid behind the desk and motioned to two chairs. "How can I help?"

I jumped in with both feet. "Tell us what happened to Fingers." My tone as much as my words brought him out of his chair indignantly.

"What the hell does that mean?"

I turned to Alice. "Did that sound like Japanese to you?"

Face red, he yelled, "Get the hell out, Jonesy! I mean it! I thought you were a friend of mine, but you come in here—"

"Sit down and shut up," I said quietly. "If I wasn't a friend, you'd be going out the door in handcuffs."

His jaw worked like that of a fish that had just been landed.

"Fingers died here last night. Gravel from that lot out there was in his shoe, and the weeds on the bank show where he was slid in."

"You're nuts! Fingers and I—"

"I know. Old friends. That's why, when you asked him to come here last night, he came. Favor for a buddy."

Beyond him, a pair of tugs maneuvered a freighter up the river. Maybe the immensity of the ship made me feel he'd shrunk in size.

"And don't tell me it happened after he left. There's a forklift out there with the tines raised. The sergeant almost walked into it. Those forks are always lowered to the floor for safety. Pick that one up cheap because the fork's stuck there?

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Needs a hard-to-get part, maybe? No other reason for those tines to be a hazard like that. Too easy for someone to walk into. Not the bargain you thought it was, Spicer. It killed Fingers. One of those tines hit him precisely where it would kill him, straight across the base of the skull. Forensic will match the mark, probably find blood. You pushed or threw him against that fork, but instead of calling for help, you slid the body into the river. The only damned reason I'm talking to you at all is that no one could plan to kill a man that way. It had to be an accident."

I rose. "But suit yourself. Want to play games? Fine. Sergeant—?"

His voice cracked as he said, "No . . . wait . . . " He rubbed a hand over his closed eyes as if trying to erase an afterimage still there.

He almost whispered the rest. "Yeah . . . it was like you said. I'd never hurt Fingers. It was that goddamn redevelopment, you know . . . offered me a million, can you believe it? For a business one step from going broke? A chance to sleep good at night instead of wondering how much longer I'd last? The bottom dropped out of the materials-handling market, Jonesy. You wouldn't believe the money I owe. But Fingers was against the redevelopment, and if he didn't want it, it wouldn't go through. My friend. Leaving me high and dry. I tried to talk to him, but he kept telling me about those people in those goddamn homes who'd be thrown out. What the hell did I care about that? Let the developers do without that parcel, he said, but they say it's all or nothing."

Anger raised his voice. "He made me so mad I just picked him up and threw him. I mean, who the hell could know it would happen? He should've just fallen down, damn him, but he stumbled back into the lift."

Amazing how the fault was always the victim's.

"I couldn't believe it, you know. I just couldn't. I kept yelling at him to stop fooling around and get up. Must have been five minutes before I'd admit to myself he was dead—"

"And thinking that you'd never get that million if anyone found out."

He slapped both hands on the desk and glared at me. "I'll tell you what I was thinking! I killed one of my best friends! I ate at his table! I drank his wine! *I was thinking of the look on Rosetta's face!* Aw, hell, Jonesy—" His groan was wrenched from the depths.

His eyes were wet, but real

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men don't let tears fall. Where they can be seen. He took a long, shuddering breath.

"We'll read you your rights at the station, and you can call your lawyer before you decide if you'll give Sergeant Follet a statement," I said.

Her mouth was open. As arresting officer, she'd be on the six o'clock news. Try passing her over for promotion now.

He gestured it away, his voice low. "I'll give you the statement."

I never doubted it. Sherwood and his attorney would bargain their way up and down from involuntary manslaughter until they found a charge and sentence that fit, but nothing could add to the pain he was already living with. Rosetta's hate and contempt would be mirrored on every face that mattered to him, and he knew most might have forgiven him if he'd called for an ambulance. People do accidentally kill each other, even old friends.

But sliding the body into the river had been no accident. He could deny it, even to himself, but the prime motive there had been the money and was unforgivable.

I went behind him, cuffed his hands, caught Alice's eye and circled my neck with a hand and jerked it upward as if hanging myself. She nodded. She knew a candidate for suicide when she saw one. He might do it after he'd made bail, but he sure as hell wouldn't get the opportunity while in custody. She took him out.

While he was telling one of the stunned women she'd have to handle everything for a few days, I picked up his phone and repaid a favor to the city hall reporter from Channel 6. "—say an anonymous source told you Detective-Sergeant Alice Follet made the arrest after the D.A.'s office provided her with a lead, and make sure you get her on camera."

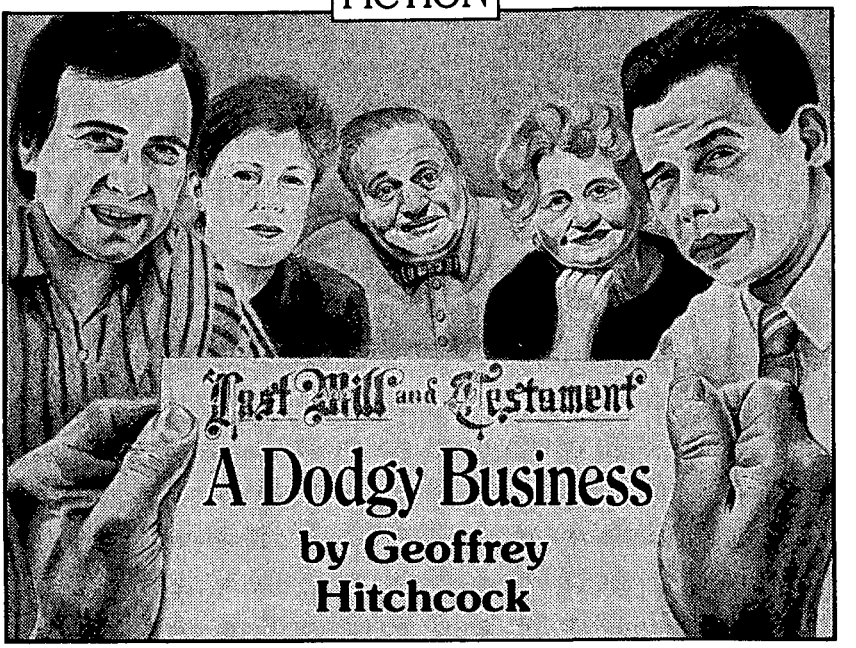
Not a bad day. Alice would get the credit, the D.A. would get mentioned favorably, and even Rossiter would get in on the tail end for a little glory.

But I'd come out ahead of them all.

Sherwood could forget about any more three o'clock in the morning phone calls, and Grace could start planning my retirement dinner right now. That piercing scream of Rosetta's had blasted me right off the fence I'd been sitting on. There *was* something else I'd be really good at, that wouldn't be a waste of time, and that could never make me doubt my reason for being.

Taking advantage of the time left before that wheelchair arrived.

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A Dodgy Business

by Geoffrey Hitchcock

Hi! I'm Bill, and the reason I know such a lot about this business is because I'm Wilf's buddy. Wilf had a doting mother who left him a house in an inner suburb and also what she would have called a "competence." Very nice, except that it didn't exactly encourage young Wilf to get out and join the rat race. Not that he's lazy or even workshy—no, he wouldn't mind a job if only jobs didn't take up so much time. Time when he could be making something in his little workshop or reading up on some subject (but no exams, please) or teaching himself to play the piano or writing poems or talking to people. So he's just lived very simply, busily, and happily until about now when love and inflation have caught up with him. He can't sell the house or cash in the investments because his mum sewed them up pretty tight in her will—no doubt to keep the other members of her family from getting their sticky fingers on them.

They are a rather unusual lot—there's her brother William, hereinafter referred to as Scrooge. He's a miser. He lives in a shabby little apartment in a shabby block and spends each

Illustration by Steve Cavallo

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precious hour making money from other people's misfortunes and consequently is very rich. Then there's Uncle Henry, the youngest of the family, who is an accountant and should be rich, too, but isn't because he doesn't like responsibility and works as a humble bookkeeper. He's not actually an alcoholic but is rather fond of a tipple, and that keeps him always short of cash but cheerful. Somewhere in between Scrooge and Henry is Aunt Doris, an impecunious widow lady who is a perfect honey. She has no money because she gives away too much to good causes. She is also what she calls a "sensitive." And finally there's Clarry, son of yet another sister and in a similar position to Wilf, but he's just a layabout who tries to keep b and s together by betting on the geegees.

Yes, an odd lot, and at this moment all bar Scrooge are sitting round the table in Wilf's dining room in high anticipation because that sour old character, Simon Dodge of Connem, Robham and Dodge, is about to read the will of Uncle Scrooge, who is cooling it in the cemetery. I have just barged in with Pet in tow. Pet is my latest girlfriend and is something special. She's a nightclub singer from America—very lovely—luxury class, perhaps a bit more than wheeler-dealer Bill Simmond's budget can maintain but so far she hasn't complained, which shows that her heart's in the right place.

"Come in, come in, and join the fun," calls Wilf.

"Get out," says Mr. Dodge, "this is family business."

"I say, that's a bit high-handed, isn't it?" says Wilf.

"We'll wait out here," says Pet diplomatically. So we draw up chairs just outside the door where his nibs can't see us but where we can hear every word. Dodge clears his throat and carries on from where he left off, which is right at the beginning.

" 'I, William Fenwick Trumpeter, being of sound mind but no longer, alas, of sound body, do sit me down, take up my pen, and do compose my last will and testament.' "

"I say," says Wilf, "what a splendid Dickensian opening—oh, sorry, Mr. Dodge."

I can imagine that old worthy's scowl, though I can't see his face from where I'm sitting, which is why he can't see me. However, he carries on. " 'Having devoted my life to the only sensible pursuit, namely the amassing of a large fortune, it is a considerable disappointment to find that, in spite of coming from a large family, I

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have not one relative worthy of inheriting said fortune.' "

"Oh, not so splendid—sorry."

Once again old Dodge ignores the interruption, but he probably looks up from the paper and surveys his client's unworthy relatives. Something puzzles him. "Who is that young lady sitting next to Mr. Tennant?"

"That's Mary—Mary Crawford," volunteers Uncle Henry.

"Is she a member of the family?"

"Not yet," says Clarry.

"Then I must ask her to leave. I don't recollect her being mentioned among the beneficiaries."

"She can stay," says Wilf. "Mary is my, er, intended. I think that's the word Uncle Scrooge—Uncle William would have approved of. And besides, she's my legal adviser."

"Is the young lady a solicitor?"

"No, but she works for a legal firm."

"Indeed—in what capacity, may I ask?"

"I'm the typist."

Snort from Dodge. "Very well, if you insist. May I continue?"

"Please do, though I see no good coming from this will. I feel William's evil presence in the room." This from Aunt Doris. She feels the presence of spirits and has strong forbodings—things like that. She is wearing her best brown dress, and it is getting very shabby. She badly needs a new pair of shoes.

Dodge clears his throat. " 'To my sister Doris, knowing full well that she will waste it on some charity or, worse still, on that ridiculous occult society of hers, I bequeath two thousand pounds.' "

"Thank you, Mr. Dodge, though it does seem a somewhat meager bequest from a very wealthy man to his only surviving sister, don't you think?"

"I'm afraid my client was a man of very strong prejudices. 'To my remaining brother, Henry, I bequeath four thousand pounds in the full knowledge that he will drink himself to death and thereby rid the world of a nuisance.' "

"By Jove, that's better than I expected, knowing what he thought of me. Seems he was less prejudiced against my sort of spirits than he was against yours, Doris."

"That's not very nice," says Doris, and Dodge presses on.

" 'To my late sister Clara's layabout son, Clarence Bingham, I bequeath four thousand pounds so that he can prove to himself once and for all that his predilection for systems is

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based on a very unsound grasp of mathematics.' "

"Oh, good. I've never had a working capital of more than three hundred pounds before."

"That in itself should substantiate the accuracy of your uncle's observation."

"Should it? I don't see . . . "

" 'Now I come to Wilfred Tennant, my late sister Mary's son. He is the only one that showed any promise. He is clever, talented, and not entirely idle, but his energies are misplaced. Therefore, in the hope of directing them to their proper course, I bequeath to said Wilfred Tennant a challenge. If by his thirtieth birthday he shall have made a million, he shall inherit the balance of my estate after all other bequests, death duties, and legal expenses have been paid.' "

"Well done, Wilf, you deserve it!"

"Yes, Wilf, I'm glad for you."

"I don't think you gents were listening. I have to make a million by my thirtieth birthday."

"Yes, we heard, but with your brains—nothing to it!"

"I'm very flattered, Uncle Henry, but . . . "

Clarry isn't so optimistic. "How old are you, Wilf?"

"He's twenty-nine, as you very well know, and his birthday's the tenth of next month," says Doris. "It's a thoroughly bad will, Mr. Dodge. I don't know how you could have allowed it."

"I don't like the will any more than you do, madam, but I must inform you that I had nothing to do with it. He wrote it himself in longhand as you can see, and it was witnessed by two people from the apartment next to his. He had it delivered to my office in a sealed envelope, by special messenger. It was hardly a week later that I visited him at his request to advise on the tax advantages of an investment he proposed to make and found him slumped over his desk, his venerable white head resting on his arms, his hand still clutching his pen. It was very sad, but he died in harness and that was as he would have wished."

"Whatever was he harnessed to, for heaven's sake?" asks Henry.

"To something very heavy." Doris is dragging her words out of the air. "Something as heavy as stone."

The others stare at her until Wilf brings them down to earth again. "Well, as long as he was happy. Though personally I think one should avoid harness."

"Sure thing," says Clarry, "especially if one happens to be a horse."

Mr. Dodge is the one who

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doesn't laugh. "Very droll," he sighs. "Do you want me to go on with the will?"

"Yes, please, are there any more bequests?"

"There is only one other bequest. 'To Simon Dodge, in appreciation of all the help and advice he has given me throughout a long association, I bequeath the sum of twenty thousand pounds.' "

"Are you sure you didn't have anything to do with this will, Mr. Dodge?"

"Certainly not, madam, it is a perfectly natural and not overmunificent bequest after almost a lifetime's business association."

"For which he paid you handsomely, no doubt," observes Henry.

"Come now," says Wilf, "that's not the right spirit. What happens to the money if I don't get it?"

Mr. Dodge overcomes his indignation and resumes reading the will. " 'In the event of my nephew's noncompliance with the terms of this my will, the funds resulting from the liquidation of my estate as above stated shall be used to erect a pyramid to my memory on Section C, Lot 39, in the village of Meadowsweet, which is presently registered in my name. I appoint Messrs. Connem, Robham and Dodge as sole executors of this will. Signed and dated etc., etc.'."

Mr. Dodge returns the document to his briefcase and stands up. "I will send checks to the beneficiaries as soon as my client's affairs have been wound up. Now I must go."

"That mightn't be such a bad idea at that," says Henry.

"Safer," says Clarry.

"Let's not have any acrimony," says Wilfred. "The situation's not of Mr. Dodge's making. You'll stay and have a cup of tea, Mr. Dodge? There are still some cakes left over from yesterday's funeral do."

But the old shark won't stay. "Time is money, you know," he says as he goes out amid a general groan.

Well, I think I recorded that pretty good. After his nibs has gone, there is more or less pandemonium. Pet reckons the old miser took it with him just as Wilf told her he would that night of the party when the news of his death came through. And I say no he hasn't, he's only tried to, and we aren't going to let him, are we? And Henry says by Jove no and there is a lot of enthusiasm about the idea until Clarry says how are we going to stop him? That brings us up short, and we scratch our heads. Somebody tells a tale about a

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man who came from Mittel Europe with five pounds in his pocket and who now owns half the city—well, a couple of blocks of it, anyway. We decide to pool our resources and find they amount to seventy-three pounds. True, it's more than five pounds, but time is against us. Clarry is for investing it on horses, but Wilf's pocket calculator says it will need five wins in a row at odds of not less than ten to one and even Clarry is daunted at that.

Wilf is the one who is least fussed. "Listen," he says, "it's just not possible, so why bash our brains? If I could do it by swimming the Channel, I might have a bash, even though I'm not really up to it, but when I have to swim the Atlantic, I don't bother to dig out my trunks. Right?" He goes off with Mary to make some tea and find the cakes. I ensconce myself behind the Sunday paper and look for ideas.

"Got it," I shout, "here's a picture of Dick Bragger, the sales of whose song 'You, You, You Da-de Do' have netted him one point two million pounds. You could write a song, Wilf. Of course you could—what about that cute song you wrote for the kids' Christmas party?"

"It's a sweet, pretty song," says Aunt Doris, but it doesn't take Wilf long to throw cold water on that idea—especially after I phone Benny and Harry and Lenny and they all tell me what and how long it takes to get a song that popular.

Henry and Doris and Clarry don't contribute much to the thinktank. It's not that they are happy with their legacies, it's just that they haven't any bright ideas. Presently Wilf and the girls go into the kitchen to make some toasted sandwiches for lunch, and I go back to the paper.

"Listen to this," I shout, "here's a guy made a cool million by inventing a bulletproof lavatory seat or something." I get up and run to the kitchen just as Pet rushes out carrying Wilf's toaster. We collide and go down in a heap.

"Ow," howls Pet, "I've broken my leg!" Wilf comes out, all concern, and starts stroking her legs. I get up and tell them about the guy's invention.

"That's not nearly as good as Wilf's sideways toaster for toasting bread with cheese on it," says Pet. Wilf considers the possibility while continuing to examine her legs. Mary comes in to retrieve the toaster and to see what's all the noise about.

"Pet's broken her leg."

"Which one?"

"Not this one," says Wilf and switches his attention to the other.

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"I don't think I've broken either of them," says Pet, getting up painfully. "I just thought I had."

Mary, I think, doesn't look too pleased at this incident, but she doesn't have to worry—Wilf is one of those faithful hounds who will follow his mistress doggedly and not sidestep to sniff a pole at the other side of the street. He's totally in love with Mary and has told me he's only waiting until he's found a decent job to propose to her formally.

Anyway, it doesn't take long for the invention idea to get flattened out. Barney tells me it takes months and months to get a patent through, and Wilf says he couldn't possibly make a million-odd toasters and sell them in three weeks. So he retrieves the toaster and we all have toasted cheese sandwiches and coffee and after that we all talk and grumble and say unkind (but true) things about Uncle Scrooge. The general consensus is that building a pyramid is a shocking waste of good money. Aunt Doris wouldn't have minded if he'd left it to Barnados or some equally worthy cause. Pet feels sorry for the mind farmers and the workers at Rolls-Royce. Clarry for the racehorse breeders and Henry for the distillers and grape growers. Mary is more upset that the pyramid (the ugly great pyramid) is to be built at Meadowsweet, one of the very few remaining unspoilt villages in the county.

Only Wilf, whose loss it really is, is unconcerned. "It's not entirely a waste," he says. "The money will be spread around among quarrymen, stonemasons, and the like, and though outsiders may not like to see Meadowsweet spoiled, those who live there may well welcome the boost to their economy that the inevitable tour buses will bring. And you have to admit that while other things soon get used up, pyramids last a long, long time!"

Wilf whipped up some scones—he's a dab hand at scones—while Pet dug into the mysteries of home economics; that is, she watched Wilf at work and Mary watched Pet to make sure she didn't watch too hard. So we had hot scones and coffee, and then we all drifted away and drifted back bearing bottles, except Doris who brought flowers and Clarry who had a huge newspaper parcel of fish and chips, and the evening turned into quite a celebration, though what we are celebrating isn't quite clear.

Good. Well done, Bill. You got your tenses a bit mixed, but we got the picture, so what happened next?

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Well, now we come to the great day, Wilf's birthday. No, wait, something happened a little while before that. Something of which I'm not particularly proud. The usually sharp Bill Simmond's wits must have been taking a nap or I would have seen . . . Anyway, what happened was this. I called in at Wilf's one morning on my way to look at a job lot of Toby jugs, but instead of Wilf I found Henry and Clarry scanning the "For Sale" ads in the *Daily Mail* with very puzzled looks on their faces. They had just come from Dodge's office and had their inheritance checks. The old man, it seemed, had treated them to a lecture about not wasting a very useful capital but to look for a good investment opportunity. They should easily be able to double their money in a couple of months. The idea excited them of course, but when they asked for more detail, he merely said, "Good gracious, young men" (Henry sixty, Clarry forty), "take a leaf out of your benefactor's notebook. He founded his fortune simply by keeping a look out for a good thing, and when he saw it, he acted on it quickly before anybody else got in on the act."

When they asked him where to look, he said anywhere and everywhere but start with the "For Sale" columns in the *Daily Mail*.

"What have you found?"

"Nothing, just a lot of old junk for sale—beds, bicycles, typewriters, you name it. You don't think he meant for us to go into the junk business, do you?"

"I hope not—it's supposed to be the start of many a fortune, but it certainly hasn't done much for me." I glanced down the columns over Clarry's shoulder. "It can't be all junk, what's that item for forty thousand pounds?"

"Don't know—we don't have forty thousand, so I didn't read it. 'Forty thousand pounds buys valuable quarry site vicinity of Meadowsweet. Deposit of eight thousand pounds secures.' "

The two beneficiaries looked at each other for maybe half a minute. "Quarry." "Meadowsweet." "Eight thousand secures." "We've got eight thousand, partner." "Whaddya think, Bill?"

It looked like one of those coincidences that are too good to be true but that do turn up now and again.

"Kismet," said Clarry.

"Let's go," said Henry. "Connem Investments, third floor Sharkey's building—why, that's just a floor up from Dodge's office, how convenient. 'There is a tide in the affairs

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of men . . . ' " he declaimed as they marched out. Connem Investments they'd said, and even then I didn't smell the rat.

Now at last we come to the morning of the birthday, and what a morning it turned out to be, though not as momentous, perhaps, as that afternoon a couple of weeks later—but first things first.

It really is a splendid morning, the morning of Wilfred's birthday. The sun is shining, the snail's on his thorn, and the world is full of optimism. Pet's had a late night, and I'm on my way early without her. Can't wait to hear the answers to a couple of questions. I meet Henry and Clarry at the gate, and Wilf welcomes us in.

"We just dropped in . . . " Henry begins.

"You see, we're anxious . . . "

"Of course, you want to be the first to congratulate me."

The shock on their two faces is a sight to behold.

"Congratulate you?"

"On my thirtieth birthday. Not much of an accomplishment, really, and nothing to show for all the years of aimless industry and study—except some good friends. But thanks all the same."

Henry is thoroughly confused. "What for?" he asks.

"For the congrats."

"Of course, I'm afraid I lost the thread of things. May your shadow never grow shorter."

"Happy birthday, Wilf."

"Thanks, Clarry."

Uncle Henry has another stab at it. "We were wondering . . . "

"Don't worry about a thing—bottle and glasses on the chiffonier—just make yourselves at home. I must get these scones in the oven before Mr. Dodge comes—I don't want him to catch me in my pinny." And with that he bounces off to the kitchen.

"He certainly had you boys dangling on a hook," I observe.

"Yes, he played with us, all right. He's full of the joys of spring this morning—do you think he's made his million?"

"He couldn't have, could he?" Clarry can't keep the anxiety out of his voice.

"Stop worrying, Clarry—if he has, he'll see us right; if he hasn't, we'll see him right."

"But we still owe Connem thirty-two thousand. Wonder who Connem is?"

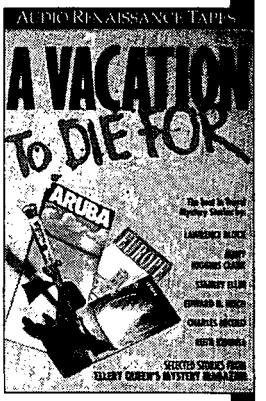
"Oh, some city magnate with more money than sense. I mean, who would want to own a quarry in the first place unless somebody was going to build a pyramid in the vicinity?"

At this point Mary comes breezing in, looking radiant.

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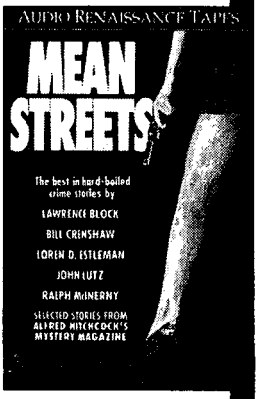


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"Hullo everybody, isn't Simon here yet?"

"Simon?"

"Simon Dodge, junior partner of Connem, Robham and Dodge."

"Junior partner!" exclaims Henry. "He must be nearly eighty."

"He's a hundred and eighty," laughs Mary.

"Good heavens—then however old is Connem?"

"He'd be two hundred, if he'd lived. He died years ago."

Clarry is shocked. "Connem and Dodge! And Connem's dead. It doesn't seem like much of an investment to me any more."

It is then, if I remember it rightly, that the doorbell rings and Mary ushers in Aunt Doris and Mr. Dodge. Aunt Doris is wearing a smart navy blue suit and a new pair of shoes, I'm glad to see, and is bursting with excitement. Dodge puts down his briefcase and stands rubbing his hands together. "Ha, the cobeneficiaries, I see, very fine day for the time of year."

"Is it," says Clarry sourly.

"You must excuse my nephew, Mr. Dodge, he's had a shock—he's just heard that Connem is dead."

"Has somebody we know passed away?" Doris is puzzled. "That's strange, I wasn't aware of it."

"Mr. Connem died, let's see, twenty years ago. Why should his death upset Mr. Bingham?"

"Because I've just had a feeling that he's robbed me of four thousand pounds."

"Nonsense, dear boy—the way I see it, he's risen from the grave and presented you with a fortune."

"I wish I had your optimism, Uncle Henry, some of your simple faith in your fellow men. Perhaps there is something to be said for drinking all that whisky after all."

Dodge plays the innocent. "I'm afraid I don't get your drift. Ah, here comes the man of the moment."

Wilf comes in, minus pinny, and Doris trots up and kisses him. "Wilfred dear, many happy returns and congratulations on your fortune! That's right, isn't it, Mr. Dodge?"

"Well, I don't know yet, that's what we've come to see about. Suppose we all sit at the table and get to business."

"That's the idea," says Wilf. "You had some fresh news from over the border, Aunty?"

"I do wish you wouldn't be so flippant, Wilfred, you don't deserve to hear it. However, I'll tell you and that will prove it, won't it, Mr. Dodge?"

Dodge, of course, is quite bewildered by this talk. "Yes, yes, by all means, madam." Then,

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aside to Henry, "What's she on about?"

"Spirits," says Henry.

"Spooks," says Clarry.

"What I'm on about, Mr. Dodge, is this. Last night at a seance I heard the voice of William Trumpeter. He said, 'So the boy made it. Well, well, this is going to be fun,' and he laughed. A rather horrible laugh, I'm afraid."

"Isn't that exciting? Let's see how it compares with what Mr. Dodge has to say. Oh, if anybody smells burning, will they please shout at once or there'll be no scones for tea. Now I expect Mr. Dodge would like to get on with it and tell us—how much?"

"Yes, we've wasted time enough. I assume you are all familiar with the late William Trumpeter's will?"

"Yes, indeedy," says Mary.

Dodge gives her a dirty look. "I suppose this young lady is still your legal adviser?"

"Yes, indeedy. She is also my fiancée. We sort of got engaged last night."

"Oh, Wilfred, I'm so glad. I always knew Mary was the right girl for you. Your auras complement each other so perfectly."

"There was a young lady named Laura," say Wilf, "who had a mauve, pink-spotted aura, but she married a feller whose aura was yeller, and he turned out to be a bad snorer."

"Wilfred! I do wish . . . " And then there's a flood of good wishes and bawdy banter until Dodge gets impatient and bangs on the table and they all quieten down.

"Thank you. Now, before there's another distraction, have you made your million?"

"Yes," says Wilf.

"You have?"

"You haven't!" The two quarry investors are clearly shocked.

"Remarkable," says the old lawyer. "Can you furnish proof?"

"Certainly," says Wilf, reaching under the table. "I have it right here in these useful supermarket plastic bags."

Dodge dips his hand into one of the bags that Wilf puts on the table. "What is this nonsense—it looks like confetti—come now, I haven't time for playing games."

"In these bags," says our hero, "you will find a million paper discs approximately five millimeters in diameter which I made personally last night using my power punch and innumerable *Women's Weeklies* kindly supplied by my fiancée."

"You made a million paper discs?"

"You will want to count them, of course, but I'm sure

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you will find a million. Just to make sure, I made ten thousand extra."

"But why . . . "

"To avoid any legal quibbles. Supposing that on counting there turned out to be a hundred short!"

"Enough of this nonsense. I'm not interested in your paper discs. Have you made the million pounds the will required?"

"Pounds?" Wilf seems or pretends to be nonplussed.

"The condition of your inheritance is quite clear. You were required to make a million pounds."

"Are you sure?"

"Of course I am. And so are you, since you were at some pains to point out the impossibility of your being able to achieve such a target."

"Have you a copy of the will with you, Mr. Dodge?" asks Mary sweetly. Mr. Dodge certainly has and in no time at all has his finger on the relevant clause.

"Here we are . . . brum brum . . . make a million by his thirtieth birthday."

"Well?" Mary is acting the legal eagle now.

"Well what?"

"Does it say anything about pounds?"

"Pounds? No, I suppose it doesn't, but pounds is implied, of course."

"Of course, dear girl," says Henry. "Mr. Dodge didn't pay me my little joy in paper discs."

"And I'm quite sure he didn't take twenty thousand bits of confetti for himself," says Doris sourly.

Mary is by no means flustered. "Does the will say he should?"

Dodge isn't keeping his cool so well. "No, it does not—see, it says twenty thousand pounds in longhand—his longhand."

"And the other bequests?"

Dodge looks through the will to make sure he hasn't tripped up again. "All pounds."

"Well, then," says Wilf.

"How much does Wilfred get? Or does Scrooge get his pyramid so that we can dispose of our quarry?" asks Henry.

"No, Uncle, I don't think Mr. Dodge would have sold us the quarry if there was any chance of the pyramid's being build. He's much too smart an operator for that."

"I sold you a quarry?" Dodge plays indignant. "I haven't the slightest notion what you're talking about."

"Oh, I think you do, Mr. Dodge, you must have known Connem's been dead these twenty years."

"Yes, I'm beginning to see." The penny has dropped for Uncle Henry at last. "We didn't know it was you selling the

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quarry or we wouldn't have bought it because you wouldn't have tried to sell it if you hadn't known that Wilfred was to get the money."

"But I didn't know. I mean, he's not going to get it."

"Why not?" Aunt Doris wants to know. Wilf says nothing but listens to the play with great interest. His impassive (and I may add impressive) "legal adviser" presses on.

"My boss," she says, "says it is quite clear that Wilfred is entitled to inherit the estate. He says the challenge clause must be interpreted as a test of his powers of observation and that by making a million paper discs he has passed the test with flying colors."

"I don't care a damn about what your boss says."

"He also says that if it comes to court he will be pleased to appear for Wilfred."

"Appear? Who the devil is he?"

"Sir Graham Law."

"Sir Graham! Oh . . . " There is a pregnant pause.

"Well?" says Doris.

Dodge jerks. "If anybody says well again, I shall leave this madhouse."

"Well, Mr. Dodge, that may not be such a bad idea. As sole executor, shouldn't you start executing? Or do you want to count the paper discs first?"

"Don't be silly. Let us assume for the moment that Sir Graham's opinion is correct."

"Yes, let's," says Doris.

"Your brother possessed very valuable assets at one time, but in his later years his judgment wasn't always so sound. And then the stock market crash . . . "

"Caught him with his pants down," puts in Henry. "How much is left?"

"If any." Clarry's pessimism is beginning to look well-founded.

"After duties were paid and the other bequests and legal expenses, there remains eighty-two thousand five hundred."

"Pounds?" Aunt Doris can't resist.

"That wouldn't have built much of a pyramid," says Henry.

"No, Uncle, that's why Dodge sold us the quarry."

"Oh, Wilfred dear," commiserates Aunt Doris, "I'm so sorry."

But Wilfred is delighted. "Why, that's exactly what we need."

"Need?" Henry wants to know what for.

"For the cottage," says Mary and hands Clarry a handbill.

Clarry reads, " 'Delightful Olde Worlde Cottage on two acres at Meadowsweet. Rock bottom price for quick sale,

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eighty thousand pounds. Apply Robham Real Estate Ltd.' "

"We'll even have two and a half thousand for legal expenses."

"How long has Robham been dead?" asks Henry.

"These fifteen years," says Dodge.

"I suppose you found this handbill pushed under your door."

"Yes," says Wilf dreamily, "it must be fate."

"Kismet!" says Clarry bitterly.

Dodge gets up to go and puts the will in his briefcase. "This may have seemed very simple to you all, but there's one thing Sir Graham overlooked—my client never thought about anything but money."

"How sad," says Wilf.

"Why so? What else is there to think about?"

"Brandy." Henry.

"Horses." Clarry.

"The occult." Doris.

Wilf and Mary are holding hands across the table and are gazing into each other's eyes. "Love," they say.

Old Dodge dips his hand into the bag and sprinkles confetti over the two lovers. A wisp of smoke appears in the kitchen doorway . . .

It is a perfect tableau to end a happy-ever-after tale . . .

But . . .

There are too many loose ends, aren't there? I mean, it's all very well for Wilf and his Mary, they have their delightful olde worlde cottage to live in and two acres to practice the good life and Wilf's competence and the rent from his house to feed them. But what about the others? How does it pan out for them? The trouble is, I wasn't present at the next scene, but I think I've put it together reasonably well from the bits and pieces I heard when I did eventually get there.

Wilfred received and banked his check and he and Mary went with Mr. Dodge to view the cottage. They get back home a little later than anticipated and find Henry and Clarry already there. (Wilf hides the key in a secret place—under the doormat—so that his friends can get in if he's not there.) Mary, looking pale and upset, ushers Wilfred in. He is wearing his arm in a sling but is his usual cheerful self. Clarry comes straight to the point. "Did you buy it?"

"No," says Wilf.

"No?" Henry brightens. "Did old Dodge try to beat you into it? Is that why your arm's in a sling?"

"I fell through the floor."

"*Before* you signed the deed of sale!" Clarry is incredulous.

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"The old boy is slipping."

"He slipped that time," says Mary.

"But I fell. Mind you, it was worth a wrenched shoulder just to see his face."

"So you still have your money?"

"Safe in the bank."

"We were wondering . . . "

"No," says Mary. She has become Wilf's protector.

"No?"

"They are wondering if you would like to buy a share in a quarry site."

"But I wouldn't?"

"Nohow."

"Sorry, boys, thank you, but no, thank you."

And then the sorry tale comes pouring out. Connem Investments is after them for the balance of the money owing on the quarry. It seems they didn't read the fine print and were supposed to pay the balance in thirty days—the day after tomorrow. If they don't, they lose their deposit. Dodge won't grant an extension, and he certainly won't cancel the sale.

"The mean beast," says Mary, furious. "It's peanuts to him."

"But he still has a property he's probably been trying to flog off for years."

"So?"

"So I think I—sorry, I mean we, I've got to get used to this—will accept our uncle's kind offer and become joint owners of a valuable quarry site."

Mary sighs—although she loves him for his generosity, she could sometimes wish he wasn't such a softie. But he doesn't see it that way. He reasons that Dodge wants the quarry back, and though it may well be for the peanut harvest, it's more likely because he's had a better offer. So, as they no longer need the money for the cottage (not that cottage, mourns Mary), they may as well help their friends and confound their enemies.

Mary gets Wilf's checkbook (they haven't got round to a joint account yet) from his pocket for him, and with a fair amount of physical discomfort he manages to write a check that he hands to Henry. "Isn't it fun playing the tycoon? That's the first five-figure check I've ever written."

"Bless you, dear boy, may your checks never grow shorter."

"You're a sport, Wilf," says Clarry, "there's just one thing."

"What's that?"

"Now that Dodge has got all of our money and a good bit of yours, how do we get it back?"

"Good question." Is Mary a shade bitter?

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"We sell the quarry at a profit."

"Wonderful," says Henry, "what it is to have a brain. Shall I take the check to Mr. Dodge now?"

And then, right on cue as in all the best melodramas (or is it farces?), the doorbell rings.

Mary ushers in Mr. Dodge, all smiles and rubbing his hands together in anticipation of something. "Ah, Wilfred, my dear boy, I just dropped by to see how you are after your most unfortunate accident."

Wilfred puts on the best expression he can manage of being in agony and says, "No need for you to worry, Mr. Dodge, the damages won't be excessive—just the doctors' fees and, shall we say four thousand for pain and suffering—" Dodge pales visibly "—and another four thousand for loss of dignity." Dodge begins to bluster. "Pounds," says Wilf.

The old rogue rallies and laughs. "You're joking, of course. It was most unfortunate that you should tread on the one weak spot in the entire cottage—nothing that a couple of sound planks won't fix. The rest of it is as sound as a bell. I have personally been over it with a fine tooth comb."

"Maybe, but it's sounded its knell as far as I'm concerned," says Mary.

"I do think you should reconsider."

"Not on your knelly," says Wilf. "Besides, we've spent a lot of the money."

Dodge is shocked almost speechless. "Spent the money! Already?"

"Yes. You see, Connem Investments are acting very harshly to my esteemed relatives over the matter of a quarry. Quite within their legal rights, no doubt about that. But still—the quality of mercy and all that? Too much to expect? However, I have written a check to cover the full amount due, so now everybody concerned will be happy. Give Mr. Dodge the check, Uncle."

"No, no," says that worthy, "I was just about to tell these gentlemen that I've been speaking to the owner . . . "

"Bad sign, when a man starts talking to himself," whispers Clarry to Henry.

Dodge pretends not to hear " . . . and I have persuaded him to cancel the sale."

"Does that mean we'll get our money back?"

"Of course." His cupidity gets the better of him. "Less fifteen percent, naturally."

"Naturally," says Clarry bitterly.

"Never mind," says Henry. "What's six hundred pounds when we still have thirty-four

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thousand we weren't expecting anyway?"

Dodge beams. "That's right, Mr. Trumpeter, that's what I call the proper way to look at it."

"Mr. Dodge," says Mary, "it's not the proper way to look at it at all."

"And quite unnecessary," Wilf takes over. "Uncle Henry and Clarry have entered into an agreement to buy a quarry site. They paid a deposit, and now they have tendered the balance, so the deal is finalized in a strictly legal and business-like manner. Is that not so?"

Dodge is beaten, he speaks like a kid deprived of candy. "I suppose so, if that's the way you want it."

"Good—now give Uncle Henry a receipt for the check."

Poor Mr. Dodge takes the check grudgingly and riffles through his briefcase. "I don't seem to have a receipt book with me," he stalls.

"You don't need a receipt book. Just write a Received from . . . on behalf of . . . in full settlement of . . . Goodness me, Mr. Dodge, I don't have to tell you how to make out a receipt!"

This rattles the old feller, and he grabs the sheet of notepaper that Mary proffers him and writes the receipt, signs, and dates it. "There. Does that satisfy you?"

Wilfred looks it over, then passes it to Mary. "Looks okay to me; what does my legal adviser say?"

"It's in order."

"Of course it is, but quite unnecessary you know. A check is a receipt of itself."

"Only if it's paid in," says Mary.

"We're learning fast, aren't we, Mr. Dodge," says Henry. "It's not that we don't trust you, it's Connem we have our doubts about."

"Connem's been aloft these twenty years."

"That will account for his acting so high-handed." They all nod their heads in agreement.

Mr. Dodge ignores them and stands up. "And now that you've bought your precious quarry, what do you intend doing with it?"

"Sell it," says Clarry, "at a profit."

"Doesn't that sound like good business to you, Mr. Dodge?" asks Wilfred innocently.

"Indeed it does, if you can find a buyer."

"You could find us a buyer, couldn't you?"

"I might if the price isn't too high. Say forty-one thousand?"

"By Jove, a thousand pound profit just like that! That is good business."

"Less," says Mary, "about

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two thousand for Mr. Dodge's commission."

Henry is deflated. "Oh, not such good business."

"No," says Wilf, "better make it eighty thousand."

"Ridiculous! It isn't worth the forty thousand you paid for it."

"I always suspected Connem was a Robham," says Clarry.

"Connem's been dead these twenty years."

"Still," Wilf stands his ground, "if we're going into the Robham—I mean, robbery business, we will do it on a grand scale. That way we get a medal. Petty thieving is frowned on."

"I don't know what you're talking about," Dodge is getting rattled, "it isn't a question of robbery. Business consists in getting as much as you can . . . "

"And paying as little as you can," Mary chips in.

"Exactly."

"Dog eat dog," says Wilf.

"Dodge eat Dodge," says Clarry.

"Are you all mad?"

"Eighty thousand?"

"I'll let you know. Good day to you."

"Good Robham," says Henry.

"Good Connem," says Clarry.

"Goodbye," says Mary, and Dodge is gone.

Then follows a period of some alcoholic refreshment and self-congratulations on how they, or rather Wilf, had shown old Dodge. Followed by a period of doubt about whether they'd done the right thing and Mary showing surprise at Wilfred's trying to make a quick buck and wondering if he, after all, was falling under Scrooge's influence (though she's not altogether averse to the idea). But of course he's not, he's just so mad at Dodge for trying to swindle them out of their little inheritances. And then once again the phone rings and it's me to say if you haven't sold the quarry yet, don't.

And then I'm on my way there with Pet and we see Aunt Doris walking along and we give her a lift and very soon we're there and I'm showing them the item in the evening paper about the new billion pound motorway that will pass within a few miles of Meadowsweet. The item that had no doubt sent Dodge scuttling round there earlier on. And soon we are all in a party mood and the girls start rustling up food and the men go out for supplies except for Wilf who sits in state nursing his shoulder and grinning like a Cheshire cat. Only Aunt Doris is holding back a little. Some of her feelings concerning Wilfred and Scrooge aren't altogether harmonious.

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Presently Clarry comes out with a thought that sobers us up. "If Dodge does buy the quarry site from us for eighty thousand, what will he do with it?"

We think on this for a while, and Wilf of course is the first one to come up with an answer. "He'll sell it to Jones for a hundred thousand—maybe a lot more than that."

"He's a shrewd one, is our Dodge," says Henry.

Clarry begins to show signs of the hidden depths none of us thought he had. "Who will Jones sell it to?"

"I'll tell you," Wilf says, "Jones won't sell it, he'll quarry the rock and make millions."

"Millions out of rock?" Henry can't believe it.

"Lots of rock. Jones will make lots of money."

"A cottage in the country." Mary is wistful.

"Jones will own a stately home."

"A racing system that may fail. Will fail."

"Jones will own a racing stable."

"A few bottles of good brandy . . . "

"Jones will drink his in distinguished company."

"He's a snob!" declares Henry.

"Who?" Mary seems to be dreaming of a stately home.

"Jones is. Who is this guy Jones, anyway?"

"You could be Jones," I say.

"Who, me?"

"All of you. I'm sure that you're all full of talents that you've been hiding. I know Wilf is—he can be manager or coordinator or whatever. Mary knows about contracts and companies and things. Henry knows how to do accounts. Clarry can . . . "

"I've got my heavy license and I sometimes drive a huge tip-truck for my friend when he wants a day off. And I can use a computer—but I can't make it pick winners."

"What did I tell you? And you've got dear Aunt Doris to pick the auspicious days. What more do you need?"

Doris says nothing. She likes the idea of everybody being busy and constructive, not sitting around waiting, like Scrooge, for somebody's misfortune to drop a plum on his plate. Suddenly she realizes that Scrooge has gone, and she has a fleeting vision of a tiny pyramid in a park in a prosperous little town and of acres of slums being bulldozed down and replaced by pleasant buildings set among lawns and flowerbeds and shady trees and fountains. "It is a propitious time right now," she smiles.

"Isn't that splendid," says

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Wilf, who up to now has contented himself with listening. "I can see we are a magnificent team potentially—but let's face it, we really are a bunch of innocents to be suddenly let loose on a rough world. We need somebody who knows the people out there—somebody who knows where things can be got or knows somebody who knows somebody who knows. Who am I talking about?"

"Bill," they all chorus.

"That's our man for all seasons," says Mary, "and all good companies need a good P.R. person—somebody who is good with people, puts anxious clients at ease and takes their minds off their worries."

"That sounds like Pet," says Henry.

"That's who I had in mind."

"Gee, thanks, and I'm not even family."

"Neither am I."

"Yet," says Wilf.

And it all becomes very jolly. Mary puts on a lively disk and we dip into the fish and chips and the wine and the whisky and do the conga and even Doris has a shot at the limbo. It is Clarry, as usual, who brings us back to earth. I can see he is going to be the useful one of the team. "I think a big truck costs about a hundred thousand pounds, and then there are crushers and loaders and dozers and . . . "

"Hire them," I say.

"And engineers and mechanics and laborers . . . "

"Hire them, too."

"An awful lot of money has to go out before we get paid for the first load of stone," says Mary, "and we've only got about fifty thousand."

"Borrow it," I say, my enormous alcoholic faith in the scheme beginning to dwindle rapidly.

"Who'd lend it to us?"

"Connem," says Wilf firmly. "Robham."

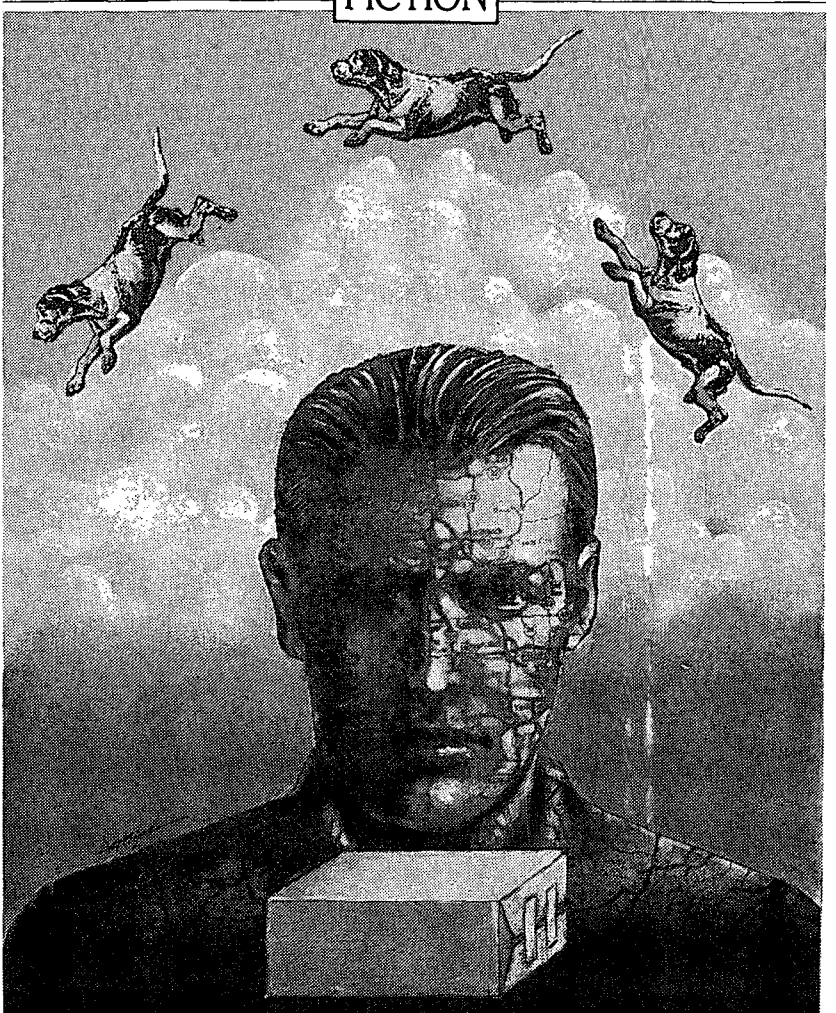
"They've been up aloft these twenty years," we all chorus.

"Well then, who better placed to give us a hand up?"

I'd like to tell you more, but I'm very busy these days, and in any case I doubt if you'd hear me above the noise of the rock crushers, bulldozers, buildings crashing down and being built up again, and above all the noise in the Stock Exchange where people clamor for shares in Pyramid Quarries, Pyramid Construction, Pyramid Developments, Pyramid CRD . . . But if in a quiet place, late at night, you should hear ghastly ghostly laughter—that'll be Uncle Scrooge.

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FICTION



How High the Dog Jumps

by Rob Kantner

Illustration by Steve McAffee

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Suite 802, Pacifica Suites Hotel, Orlando. February 5

Bobby woke with a start.

"Keep it down," came Dad's hoarse whisper from the bedroom. "You'll wake up the kid."

The kid squinted at the digital: twelve fifteen A.M. Just six hours till we start for home, he thought. Vacation's over. But first, right on schedule: another Mom and Dad fight!

"He won't hear us," whispered Mom. "He was on the rides all day, he's dead to the world."

"Just keep it down," insisted Dad.

Bobby slipped out of bed, crept over to the wall, and leaned against it, listening. About time they had it out, he thought. Trouble had been brewing behind his father's glassy eyes since the day they left home. Who knew why? Bill trouble, tax trouble, legal trouble, some kind of trouble. Bobby knew Dad would never tell him the truth—just give him a bunch of bogus fairy tales, as if he were in fourth grade rather than eighth—and he probably wouldn't tell Mom the truth either. But Bobby had to listen anyway, trying, like Mom, to sift the tidbits of truth out of the blizzard of bull.

"Tom, Tom, Tom," sighed Mom. "I can't believe you screwed up again."

"I didn't screw up," he whispered back. "It's just one of those things."

"One of those things."

"Uh-huh."

"I see."

Silence.

"When did you find out?" she whispered.

"The day before we left."

"And you kept it from me."

"I didn't want to ruin your vacation, dear."

"Maybe things aren't as bad as you think."

"The bank tore up my line of credit," his father said patiently. "Without credit I'm out of business, Jennifer."

Out of business, Bobby thought. That's a new one. Way to go, Dad!

"How could you let this happen?" asked his mother.

"Hey, it's not my fault, *I* work twenty hours a day. It's the crappy market. And my partners working both sides of the street. Plus the big chains, the fat cats out of New York and L.A. sticking a gun in my ear, while the government looks the other way."

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"Yes," she said dully, "those awful 'they' people. The same ones who ruined your silver plan, and that land deal up in Novi—"

"Land on which Twelve Oaks Mall now sits," Dad cut in. "My instincts were right on that one, it's just my timing that was a little off."

"About twenty grand off."

Up from ten grand, Bobby thought with a grin.

"So what we have to do," Bobby's father said, voice dropping to full whisper, "is lower our sights a little."

"Meaning?"

"Well, for starters, get rid of the cleaning lady." That Bobby didn't care about. "Quit the country club." Ditto. "No more trips like this." Who cares? Bobby thought. Rather be home with my friends. "And Bobby goes back to public school."

Bobby clenched his fists and shook them once, hard. Yeah! Goodbye, geeks!

Silence from Mom.

"It's just for awhile," Dad said. "Just till I get something else going."

"Which will take how long?"

"In this economy? A year, maybe two. The right concept'll come along, no prob."

"The right concept."

"In the meantime, you'll need to pick up a job."

"A job? Oh, Tom, that's out of the question."

"Not a whole lot of choice, babe."

By now they were no longer whispering.

"Let's see if I've got this straight," Mom said. "*You* screw up, so my life gets disrupted."

"Would you prefer the disruption of bankruptcy?"

"Oh, you always exaggerate."

"If we cut everything to the bone and cross our fingers and get real lucky—and you get a job—we should be able to hang onto the house. Barely."

Cool! Bobby thought. Dad's rolling out the big guns now! This was where Mom usually started to cave in. Sure enough, after a moment she said sullenly, "Well, I'll get a job if I have to, as long as it doesn't conflict with my tutoring work."

Dad snorted.

"Why don't you lose that, too, as long as we're making some changes?"

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"I can't just pull out in midstream, Thomas."

"I think once you're working you'll be too tired to teach ABC's to some crappy little lowlife."

"Clive is no lowlife. He's off parole now, he just got a promotion, and he's making splendid progress with his reading. If I quit it'll set him back months. Years."

Oh yeah, Bobby thought. Like you really care how good Clive's reading is. He'd heard the way she talked on the phone to Clive when Dad was not around.

"Too bad," Dad said. "In a crisis like this, we do what we have to do. Everybody's got to sacrifice."

"What are you sacrificing?" Mom asked sulkily. "The track? The bridge games? The trips to Vegas?"

"All tax deductible, completely legitimate business expenses. Give me a break here."

"How very nice for you."

"But," Dad said, "there is one thing you don't have to give up. That's absolutely free."

"Tom, for heaven's sakes, stop it."

"Come on, babe, let's party."

Bobby tiptoed back to bed, picked up his Game Boy, switched it on, and quickly lost awareness of his parents' games as he immersed himself in his own.

Goodstone Service Center, Highway 441, Orlando. February 5

The service manager zipped the Visa card down the slot. "Just take a minute for the authorization, Mr. Bolthouse."

"Fine, no prob," Tom said. As he stared at the little green readout, he sent up a silent prayer to the credit card god: please please puh-*leeze,* let it go through.

Beep!

The service manager squared the repair bill on the counter and clicked the Visa down next to it. "Just need your John Henry on there and you're all set." Tom sighed, gratefully, and put the Visa card away. "Safe trip, now," the manager called as Tom pushed his way out the door.

The morning was chilly, gray, and dismal; perfect, Tom thought, for an all-day drive, and identical to every other day of this entire crappy vacation. Beyond the wide oily tarmac of the Goodstone lot, Highway 441 ran heavy with commuter traffic. Overhead, an L-1011 gave a long piercing scream as it descended toward the

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airport to the east. Behind him, inside the wide open repair bays, the Goodstone workers banged and clanged, already hard at work though it was just eight thirty. Up the road a mile or so loomed the towering chrome and glass Pacifica Suites Hotel, where Tom had also prayed to the credit card god that morning. As he trotted toward his van, he hoped that Jennifer and Bobby had finished packing and would be ready to roll when he returned. Tom wanted to get started; it would be a long drive to Chattanooga.

And, most likely, a silent one as well. Jenny was in a full blown snit from the little talk they'd had last night. But that was okay. Tom knew how it would go. He'd handled her a million times. The key thing was to withhold bad news till she was off her turf. Make sure she had time, such as a two day drive home, to adjust to the new reality. By the time they reached home she'd be all broken in, with the program and ready to go, no prob.

He'd almost reached his van when a black Cadillac Seville swerved into a space in front of him. "Hey, Tommy," called the driver as he popped the door and climbed out. "Thought I'd find you over here."

"Well, good morning, Eric," Tom said, dredging up the name with practiced ease as he shook hands with the younger man. Eric was a regular in Bouncy's Lounge at the Pacifica; he and Tom, finding that they shared a fondness for Absolut, had closed the place a couple of nights. Leasing, the guy did. Some crappy little job like that. God, they dressed informally for business down here. Open-necked pullover shirt, slacks, blazer, gold chains. "What brings you out here?"

"Just wanted to say adios," Eric said, grinning. Wish I could get him to sell for me, Tom thought. He's a natural. "So," Eric asked, gesturing at the van, "was it a nail?"

"Nuh-uh. Bad stem. Replaced the pair, they were pretty bad anyway."

"Uh-huh."

"It's seven hundred to Chattanooga and another six fifty to Detroit. Need good sneakers."

"I hear that." Eric strolled around the back of the big blue van with the large dark tinted windows. "Nice wheels," he commented. "Like it?"

"Oh yeah, it's great," Tom said. "It's my wife's, actually. I drive a 'Vette." I may drive it, Tom thought, but the bank owns it, and the bank might be getting it back pretty soon. Christ.

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Eric was looking at the blue Michigan plate. "Ever heard of a place called Northville?"

"Northville, Michigan?" Tom asked. "Sure."

"Far from you?"

"Not really. We live in Livonia. Why, you know somebody there?"

"Not exactly." Eric rubbed his thick tanned neck. "I've got a shipment headed there, that's all." He looked blank-faced at Tom. "I was wondering if you could carry it up there for me. I'd make it worth your while."

"What kind of shipment?" Tom asked, thinking about space.

"Just a box, yay big by yay big. Listen, come over here, let me share something with you." Eric guided Tom toward the front of the van, nearer the multilane rush of cars on Highway 441. Here their hair was tossed by the exhaust-tainted gusts, and Tom had to listen intently to hear Eric's low tones. "In my business I do a lot of shipping," he said. "Very specialized shipments. Private, confidential, urgent. I can't rely on common carriers, you follow?"

Tom, trying not to stare, was beginning to.

"And couriers," Eric went on, "well, good ones are hard to find and even harder to keep. So a lot of times when I make friends with people heading in a consignee's direction, I like to cut a deal. A nice cash deal, no paperwork, no complications. A win-win type of deal."

It didn't take Tom long to decide. We do what we have to do, he'd told Jenny. But you shouldn't ever agree too quick. You want to hesitate, consider, stall, see how high the dog jumps. "So what's my end?" Tom asked. . . .

An hour later, the hundred crisp hundreds were packed in a manila envelope in a manila sleeve inside Tom's briefcase. Eric's box, twenty-some solid pounds wrapped anonymously in brown butcher paper, now occupied the camcorder case. Both items were packed under the van's third seat where no one would stumble across them, buried amid all the luggage and other vacation paraphernalia, right below where Bobby sat engrossed in his Game Boy.

And so, as Tom guided his wife's crappy van onto Florida's crappy double-nickel turnpike on this crappy gray February day on the way to crappy Chattanooga, he smiled at Jennifer and said, "Remember what we talked about last night?"

She did not even look up from *Us*. "Uh-huh."

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"Don't worry about it just yet, okay?"

That fetched a glance. "I suppose," she asked slowly, "you've found your new concept?"

"Hey," Tom said cheerfully, "I'm the brains of the outfit, aren't I?"

HighwayRest Motel, Brainerd Road, Chattanooga. February 6

As Lynnette had anticipated, the green readout promptly came up DECLINED. She laid the Visa card on the counter and said regretfully, "I'm sorry, Mrs. Bolthouse. They won't even let you have fifty."

"Bastard," the woman whispered.

"These computers is ornery sometimes," Lynnette agreed.

"I'm talking about my sorry-assed husband," the woman answered. Behind her, seated on a lobby chair, her teenage son looked up briefly from his handheld game. "Looks like we'll be traveling lean, Bobby," his mother told him.

Lynnette had been night manager here long enough to become calloused about the "guests." In a place like this, there were only four kinds: surly, sullen truckers; boozy, butt-grabbing salesmen; stingy, shrill tourists; and assorted freeway flotsam.

But Mrs. Bolthouse seemed like an upstanding gal with a lot on her mind. She'd first come to the office an hour earlier, delicate face pale and jittery, and asked for aspirin. Lynnette, of course, had had to tell her that the HighwayRest provided no such amenities—what do you think this is, Motel 6??—and Mrs. Bolthouse had said she'd go look in her van for some. Lynnette had thought no more of it and returned her full attention to the late night *Columbo* rerun. Now, an hour later, Mrs. Bolthouse was back. This time she carried a satchel, had her son in tow, and wanted a hundred dollar advance off her husband's Visa card. Lynnette was no psychic, but she could see what was going on. She wondered what had happened to Mrs. Bolthouse's headache. Probably left him sleeping in the room. "Is there anything I can do to help, ma'am?"

"Thanks," the woman answered, putting her dead Visa away. "I'll figure something out." She came out of her purse with jingling keys. "How do I get to 75 from here?"

Lynnette flipped a mimeographed map onto the counter and pointed with a pen. "Turn right out of the lot, that's Highway 11. Up a couple of miles to 153, make a right, the interstate's right there, you can't miss it."

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"Thank you," the woman answered. She started away, turned back. "Do you have any brown wrapping paper? And shipping tape, like for wrapping up parcels?"

"No, ma'am. But they sell them at the Pit 'n' Git, at the cloverleaf there."

"Thank you." Mrs. Bolthouse jingled her keys and gave Lynnette a look that the night manager understood completely. "When he comes looking," she said, "tell him I'm doing what I have to do. Tell him that *exactly.*"

"Yes, ma'am," Lynnette said with a small smile. "Safe trip now, hear?"

Two hours later, when Lynnette gave Tom Bolthouse the message, she never saw a man turn so deathly pale in her whole life. How about this! she marveled. He must really and truly love her.

Sweetwater Barracks, Tennessee State Police, February 6

Blankenbicker rapped on his boss's door and pushed in without waiting. "Got him," he rumbled. "He rented a little Ford car just off the highway, and he's northbound on 75, going like a bat out of hell."

Yipe smiled thinly, stretched his lanky, almost cadaverous form out, planted one meticulously spit-shined black wingtip on the edge of his government issue desk, and checked his Timex. "And by now she's above Knoxville. Got two hours on him, unless he really pulls a butt muscle."

"Which he is." Blankenbicker grinned. "Patrol boys are itching to take him down, but I said to leave him be."

"Damn straight. This is bigger'n just us."

"But what a collar, huh, boss?"

"Five keys, the boys said."

"Lotta blow."

"Yes, sir."

The two men mused silently on what might have been.

"So," Yipe said presently, "we'll track 'em to Kentucky, and Kentucky'll track 'em to Ohio, and Ohio'll track 'em to Michigan, right into the welcoming arms of the federales."

Blankenbicker lowered his bulk into the split-skinned guest chair. His large moon face glistened as he ran a puzzled paw across his black brush cut. "This all work for you, boss?"

Yipe shrugged. "What choice is there? If we bust him here, we've got nothing. Besides, he's just the patsy. It's his connection they

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want, and that'll be up in Michigan, and we got no jurisdiction up—"

"I know that," Blankenbicker cut in.

"Then why the squirrel in your girdle?"

Blankenbicker fidgeted. "Quantity seems a tad small, for all the effort. Pattern's been—"

"I know what the pattern's been," Yipe interrupted. "Maybe hubby boy wouldn't do more. Put on a load limit."

The big man grinned dutifully. "Then there's her."

Yipe studied his former partner. "What about her, Cookie?"

"Burning her old man this way."

Yipe shrugged again. "Works for me."

Blankenbicker's good-living face was troubled. "I can see her dropping a dime," he rumbled. "I can even see her taking immunity and falling over on him. But her offering to do a sting like this, I don't know, it don't feel right—"

"Public-spirited citizen?" Yipe suggested.

Pause. "Yeah," Blankenbicker said presently. "Or maybe he's been screwing around on her."

"Or," Yipe said, "maybe he left the seat up one too many times."

Blankenbicker joined in the laughter. "Yeah," he rumbled. "Oh yeah. That I'd buy."

Greenmeadows Lane, Livonia, Michigan. February 6

The cramped interior of the truck was ghostly dark, mostly silent, and hot and stuffy despite the frigid temp outside. Bill sat hunched over the console, strapped into headphones, barely visible in the greenish silvery light from the console's LED's and the muddy glow from the one-way window that looked out on the snow-covered subdivision street. Bill should have been tired—he'd been sitting there nearly four hours now—but he wasn't. He was used to it. He'd once done twenty hours on this very stool, doing the thing he loved to do best: catching bad guys.

With expert fingers he flipped a couple of switches. The voices in his headset ceased suddenly, replaced by a dial tone, then a torrent of computer clicks, a half ring, and the female subject's tense voice: "Hello?"

"He's just got off at Ann Arbor Road," Bill said. "Five minutes out now. Are you ready?"

"I guess so," she answered. "I just want it to be over."

"Did you place the unit?"

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"I stuck it on the underside of the table."

"Let's test it." Bill flipped a switch and guided a slider to the right. Pressing a button, he said, "Say something now."

"Testing testing," she said. He heard it echoing through the headset, accompanied by a hot jolt of feedback that sizzled his brains. Damn, he thought, hitting the switch abruptly. "It works," he told her.

"I just don't know about this," she said nervously.

"No turning back now," he answered. "Don't worry, you're doing the right thing." Another voice cut in briefly on his headset. Bill acknowledged, then said, "He's coming, Mrs. Bolthouse. It's showtime."

"Okay," she answered faintly. " 'Bye." She hung up.

Bill looked out the window and saw the little Ford Escort swerve into the snowcovered driveway and park beside the big Dodge van. He hit a button to roll videotape, then pressed another and said, "You copying all this, Fat Lady?"

"I copy," came Fat Lady's baritone.

Bill saw the Escort door open. The male subject, wearing jeans and a dark blue parka, got stiffly out of the car, slammed the door, went to the back of the van, opened the double doors, and leaned in. Almost immediately he closed the doors—locking them first, Bill noticed—and hoofed up onto the snowcovered stoop. He had to use his keys to get in because, per the script Bill and Fat Lady had prepared, the female subject had locked the front door. When the husband was out of sight, Bill paused the video camera, turned up a slider on his console, centered all the needles, and listened to the faint echoing voices from inside.

"What the hell. What the *hell!*"

"I know you're upset. I'm sorry, Tom."

"Taking off on me like that! With the van, and all my stuff! Had to rent that little pissant car out there, cost me fifty bucks plus the dropoff charge. Where's Bobby?"

"He went out somewhere."

Bill thought the male subject was Oscar material. The hurt, the indignation—a classic performance.

" 'Doing what I have to do,' you said. Would you mind explaining to me what the hell that meant, Jennifer? Would you mind explaining to me what in the Christ is going on here?"

"I just . . . I just lost it, Tom. I was so upset about your company folding, and . . . I got angry, and—"

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"Didn't I tell you I had it all under control? Didn't I tell you not to worry? Didn't I?"

"But you're such a liar all the time."

"I am not."

"You lie about everything. You know you do."

"Well, we all have our less admirable qualities. But you got to admit that on balance it's all been pretty good for us."

"I know you try hard."

"I hate to think about how much further ahead in life we'd be if you'd just trust me once in awhile."

In the darkness of the van Bill played a couple bars of air violin. The male subject's act was wearing thin, but Bill was increasingly impressed with the female's performance. That line about lying, that wasn't in the script, but it played perfectly. Bill and Fat Lady would give her two enthusiastic thumbs up.

"So, are we okay, Jen?"

"I guess. I'm just so tired I can't see straight. Too tired to fix dinner, or unpack the van, or—"

"Don't worry, babe, I'll take care of all that. I got to run out for a bit, you going to be okay here?"

"I'll be okay."

"You don't look so good."

"Just tired."

"Back soon, babe."

Bill rolled video as the male subject stormed out the door, boarded the big Dodge van, and backed it out of the driveway. Busy deploying mobile units and other assets, Bill ignored the faint, almost imperceptible sounds in his headset. Then he realized it was the sound of vomiting, inside the house.

Amateurs, he thought.

Northville Crossings, Northville, Michigan. February 6

Earle sat motionless in the front seat of his old Chevy S-10 pickup as the country sounds of WCXI radio filled the cab almost as thick as the smoke from his Marlboro. Almost nighttime, he thought, and here I am behind a deserted strip mall waiting for another damn tourist to show. Half hour late. Typical.

Then, of course, he'd have to be up at the crack of dawn to make the delivery to the Reserve Center, where it would be parceled out for distribution. A very good system, he thought. Very efficient. The only flaw in the ointment, as he termed it, was this business

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of tourists. He understood the cost rationale well enough. For a po' boy from Ar-*kan*sas, he thought, I got a fair to middlin' head for numbers. But he also had good instincts for people, and this business of tourists was, in his humble opinion, nuts. They were flakes. They watched too much TV. They didn't understand the business. One day there'd be trouble, Earle was sure of it.

But not tonight, he hoped. Tonight he had tickets to see Kenny Rogers up at the Palace of Auburn Hills, and he sure didn't want to—

A large Dodge van came barreling up the snowpacked drive alongside the south wall of the strip mall. Earle squinted at it as it rounded the jagged lineup of big brown dumpsters and headed toward him, its high beams bright in the gathering evening. Here we go, Earle thought. Better late than never, you sorry son of a bitch.

The van swerved, slowed, and crawled to a halt with its driver's side adjoining Earle's. Earle waited till the engine shut down, then killed the music, pushed open the door, and dropped to the snowpack. The tourist, a much larger man in a dark blue parka wearing one of those fast-talking salesman faces, got out, smiling jauntily. "Made it!" he said, beaming, extending a hand toward Earle. "I'm Tom. How're you doing tonight, buddy?"

Earle ignored the hand. "Let's be done with it," he said tersely.

The man went serious. "Okay, sure, right. It's back here." He led Earle to the rear of the van, unlocked the big double doors, and pulled them open. A duffel bag fell from the stack packed high behind the third seat; Tom caught it and gave Earle a man-to-man grin. "Women," he snorted. "I had this all nice and neat before we left Orlando."

The cold was working its way up from the frozen, snowpacked pavement through the soles of Earle's hand-tooled cowboy boots, and the icy breeze was tugging at the edges of his lined denim coat. "Less yap," he said, "and more action."

"Sure, okay, I'm sorry." As Earle watched, the tourist tossed luggage and parcels over the back of the third seat, excavating his way into the area under the seat. "Here it is," he said, and tugged the parcel through the tangle of unused seat belts. "Safe and—"

"Wait a minute," Earle said abruptly, staring at the parcel. "Let go of it."

The tourist obeyed, giving Earle a quick glance. "What is it?"

Earle's cold gray eyes studied the tourist's big salesman face. He

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put his hand into the deep pocket of his coat. "You opened it up."

"Me? Hell no!"

Earle looked at it again. No question. Son of a bitch. Of all the nights! "Don't jerk me around, son," he advised, coming out of the coat with his tiny 9mm HK P7 automatic pistol. "You opened it up, dintcha? You peddled some out of there, dintcha?"

The tourist's face had gone stark white. His big hands went up and he tried to back away, only to bump into the open van door. "I didn't touch it!" he said, voice a soprano squeak now. "I swear to ya, I—"

"Federal officers," came a booming megaphone voice from a great distance behind them. *"We've got you dead bang centered in the crosshairs. Drop the gun and lean against the van. Both of you!"*

"You little son of a bitch," Earle hissed, raising his pistol. He heard the tourist scream in terror, but he never heard the shot that splattered his own head. Never felt his pistol fire as he went down. Never saw the shock and disbelief on Tom Bolthouse's face as he fountained blood from his dark blue parka, took two staggering steps toward nowhere, then went to his knees and belly-flopped facedown on the cold snowy ground.

Detroit Metropolitan Hospital, Livonia. February 9

Capitani thought the security was a little excessive. At the detention wing entrance, his I.D. was inspected, and he was frisked by two uniforms. Same thing at the door to Bolthouse's room. You'd think, from the way the cops were acting, that they were dealing with Al Capone here, instead of an overfed greedy schmuck who screwed up and got himself shot.

The scene inside the tiny room had not changed much since the morning. Jennifer Bolthouse, pale and delicate, sat in the guest chair. She'd traded her trashy paperback for a *People* magazine. Tom Bolthouse had not changed at all, except that this time he seemed to be awake. He lay almost invisible under a blanket and sheet, plugged into two IV's from a tree to his right, wired up to some sort of blinking, humming monitor mounted on the wall, breathing oxygen through a plastic tube clipped to his nose. His big, good-living face had the white of frostbite. "Afternoon," Capitani said, closing the door behind him.

Jennifer dogeared the *People* page and closed it. "Mr. Capitani," she replied in a toneless, almost formal voice. "What did you find out?"

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"It's as I thought," he answered, setting his briefcase down. "They won't deal."

Jennifer did not respond. Either she's a very controlled person, Capitani thought, or she's in a state of shock. It was Tom Bolthouse who spoke first. "No deal?" he croaked. "So what's the bottom line?"

Capitani faced him. "Unless they change their minds," he answered, "we're talking life, Mr. Bolthouse."

Jennifer gasped quietly. She knew what that meant because Capitani had laid out the options for her earlier, while her husband was still under. Now Capitani had to give him the word. He let Bolthouse speak first. "How many years? If I plead guilty?"

"Life," Capitani repeated. "Without possibility of parole."

Jennifer's head was bowed, hand covering her mouth, eyes glassy. Bolthouse seemed frozen in bed. "Come on," he said, voice shaky at the edges. "It's a first offense. They always deal."

"The law is very specific," Capitani answered, "and very inflexible. Possession of cocaine in quantity means life in prison without parole. The judge has no options. Only the prosecutor can—"

"So talk to the D.A.!" Bolthouse cut in. "I'll plead guilty. Save them the expense of—"

"They don't need your plea," Capitani answered. "They've got you cold. And they seem quite anxious to make an example. War on drugs, just say no, and all that."

"It's a first offense," Bolthouse said weakly.

"There are other first offenders doing life now," Capitani replied, "who were caught with much less than you were. Who did not transport it fifteen hundred miles across five state lines."

Neither Bolthouse said a word. After a moment Capitani added, "I'll mount a defense, if you wish. There's always the chance of procedural error. But I wouldn't—"

"So," Jennifer Bolthouse said as she got to her feet, "this is where it ends, eh, Tom?"

"What do you mean, babe?" Bolthouse asked hoarsely.

"So ends your last big concept," she said, walking toward the door. "You destroyed your life, but I'm going on with mine, no prob."

"Come on, Jen! You don't mean that."

At the door she turned and faced him, the planes of her delicate face angular and ugly. "At times like this, we do what we have to do. Adios, baby." She left the room.

For the first time, Capitani was a little uncomfortable. Bolthouse

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was staring at the ceiling, motionless. Glad I'm not in domestic practice, Capitani thought. Nothing meaner, nothing uglier, nothing nastier. Give me a nice clean dope dealer any time. "I'll be in touch, Tom," he told his client, and left.

Jugg Poltiss' Texas Time Saloon, New Boston, Michigan. February 12

"That was quick," Jennifer said above the bedlam of music and voices as Clive returned to their booth.

He tossed her van key on the rough-hewn wood table and resumed his place across from her. The buxom server delivered fresh Millers in tall tapered glasses. Clive took a pull from his and gave Jennifer a once-over, as if for the first time. So relaxed she was, sitting in a slight leaning slouch, staring away from him across the dark smoky saloon. Blonde hair tied back in a ponytail, delicate almost-pretty features lightly made up; she looked younger than she was, young and quite tasty indeed.

When she didn't press him for an answer, he said, "It passes."

"Good," she replied coolly. Her hands loosely held her barely touched glass of beer. Nothing else on the table but the key and a cheap tin ashtray. No schoolbooks today, no recitations; they had more pressing business.

When he didn't reply, Jennifer asked, "So what do you think?"

"I think I can help you," he answered.

She betrayed no reaction. "What's my end?"

He shrugged slightly in his black leather coat. "I'd say a grand."

She leaned her head back. "Doesn't seem like much, for that quantity."

"You've got about five keys there," he answered. "But there's risks, you know. Expenses—"

"Come on," she cut in. "People get as much as ten thousand just for muling it."

"You're dreaming, teacher lady."

"I know for a fact."

His smile was thin and indulgent. "You know."

She just stared calmly at him.

He shifted in his seat. "Maybe," he admitted. "Sometimes. For much larger quantities."

She shook her head. "The number is ten, Clive."

"Look, Jennifer, I'm your friend. I want to—"

"Ten."

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"Forget it," he said softly. "I'm sorry."

She drank some beer then, just a dainty little sip. The server stopped by and darted on. A drunken woman nearly collapsed into their table. Jennifer looked at Clive. "Maybe you've got a point about the quantity," she said. "So let's say five."

He pretended to consider. "Fair enough." Pure lady like that, by the time I get done stepping on it I'll triple my take.

She smiled at him, toasted him, drank. Tom's ten and my five. Not bad for a day's work. And if he tries to point fingers, it's just his word against mine.

Clive saw that Jennifer's face had gone luminous now in the muted light of the saloon. "I'm curious," he said. "If you were willing to take five, why did you hold out for ten?"

"It's not smart to agree too quick," she answered. "You want to hesitate, consider, stall, see how high the dog jumps."

"I see," he said, amused. "And, if I may ask, how did a nice middle-class lady like you come by this merchandise?"

"Fell off a truck."

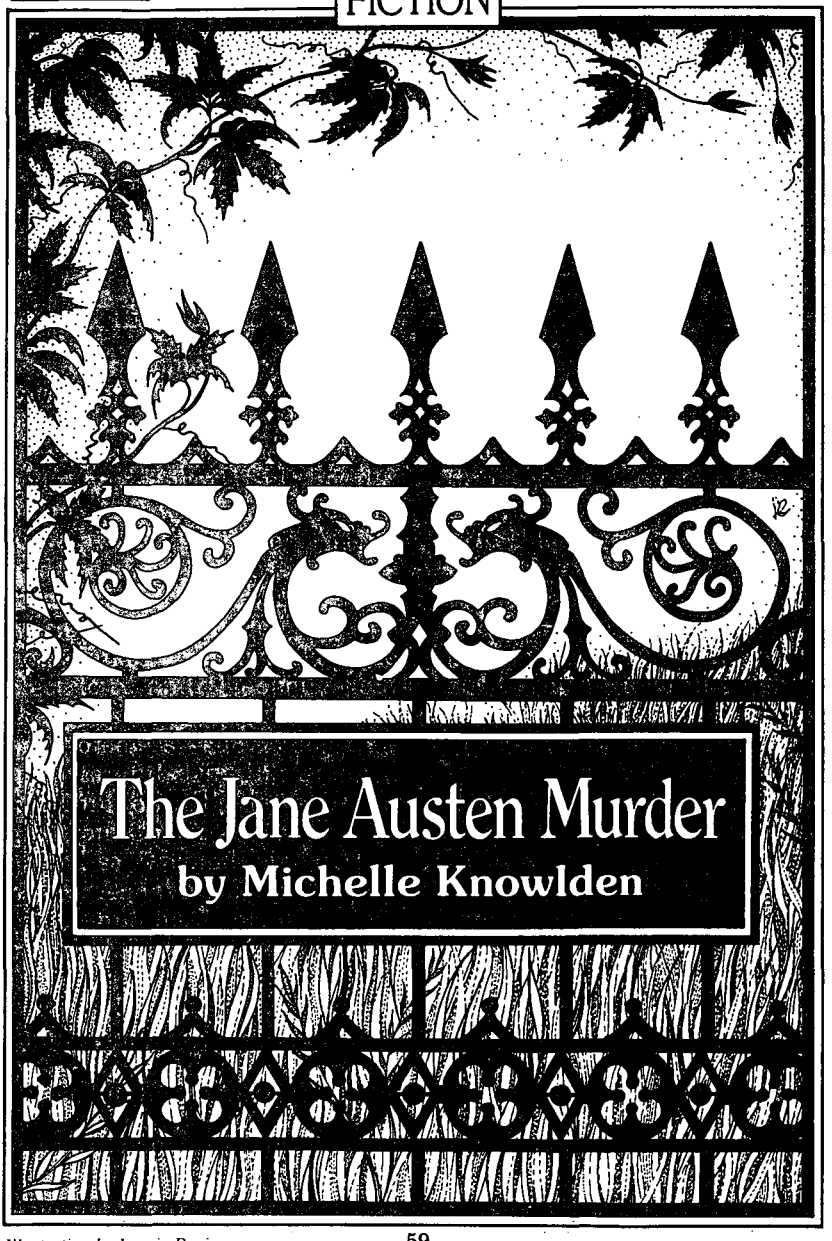
The server brought refills.

"You know," he said presently, "I really underestimated you, teacher lady."

"That's okay," she said, touching his hand and smiling. "I'm used to it."

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The Jane Austen Murder

by Michelle Knowlden

Illustration by Laurie Davis

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I was dying slowly. Cholera was seeping into my blood. My fever hot eyes blurred the print on the paper before me, and the pulse raced beneath my clammy skin. A voice on the intercom was only so much noise.

Shaking, I pressed the switch. "Not now, Millie. Send them away." I slipped back in my chair into a stupor.

A moment later the door flew open. An expanse of purple linen filled the small office. A large angry face appeared, topped by a white hat. Large manicured hands slapped the desk with white gloves. I winced and checked *Biddle's Medical Encyclopedia* opened at cholera—yes, noise sensitivity was a symptom of the disease.

"How dare you send me away!" The purple blur swelled with indignation.

The secretary behind her was asking me if I wanted Security. I waved my hand languidly. "It's all right, Millie. I'll take care of this."

The woman in purple sat heavily in the chair facing me. She was still fuming, but now wordlessly.

I wiped my damp brow. "What do you want, Aunt Helena?" I asked her wearily. "As you can see, I'm not feeling well and would like to go home."

She looked at me suspiciously. "What's wrong with you?"

"Cholera."

She snorted. "Don't be ridiculous. No one gets cholera in Wisconsin."

"I think I caught it from the missionary at church last week." Too late, I remembered she had made one of her infrequent appearances at church at the same service I attended. Which had probably reminded her that it was time to check up on me.

"The missionary from Alaska? Don't be a fool, Michaela." Her eyes narrowed. "Six months ago you were dying of cancer. A year ago it was bronchial pneumonia. Before that you were bedridden with angina. What game are you playing?"

I closed my eyes. I was dying alphabetically. Slowly my immune system was working its way through *Biddle's Medical Encyclopedia,* whether it was the paperback version in my suitcase, the two volume set in my office (always opened to the current malady), or the leatherbound edition near my bed.

Aunt Helena was still talking. "Your malingering is endangering your monthly check from your uncle's trust. As the executor of his trust, I will execute his wishes to the best of

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my ability. One of his wishes was that no money would be given to any niece or nephew who was not gainfully employed."

"I am fully aware of the terms . . . "

She swept on as if I had not spoken. "I think it is time to check the books of your detective agency. Except for the occasional murder case I find for you, I doubt you've done a single investigation."

"The agency has been busy with a number of investigations, Aunt Helena. Gary LaMare is backlogged on a number of insurance cases. Robyn's assisting him, along with managing several research projects in our literary investigations department. The agency is doing fine."

"I was not inquiring about your partner's or your assistant's workload. I want to know what you have been doing. You're the one in charge of criminal investigations for your agency. What are you working on now?"

As I slipped further and further into the sickness, the recent past was turning into color-bright images moving with a dreamlike quality. Aunt Helena was assuming some of these same qualities. Only her booming voice came through clearly.

I mopped at my brow again and took a sip of water. My throat felt like splintered wood. "I was offered the Simons' stolen jewelry case last month."

She leaned eagerly forward. "I read about it in the newspaper. I know it's the gardener. Have you pinned it on him yet?"

"I couldn't take the case. I was recuperating from chicken pox last month."

Her expression was apoplectic. I was past caring. The room was beginning to spin in slow circles.

"This has gone too far! The trust will no longer tolerate your hypochondriacal obsessions. Either you take a case immediately, or your funds will be stopped."

"Aunt Helena—no one has called in a case for over a week. The doctor's given me medication for the cholera. I'll go home, sleep, and maybe even recover. Next week I may be well enough to take a case."

She sniffed. "That is not acceptable. It appears I must once again bring you a case. Have you heard of the Emma Harris murder case?"

I frowned. The pounding in my head was worse. "In Mansfield Park? Husband reported her missing on Monday? Body found by a friend yesterday in friend's house? Looked as if she

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had interrupted a burglary?"

Aunt Helena nodded in a self-satisfied way. "Emma's godmother is one of my dearest friends. She and I started a chapter of the Jane Austen Literary Club and Tea Hour here three years ago. This has all been such a dreadful trial for her. Emma was a sweet girl."

Not like me. "What has this to do with me?" I asked wearily.

"Joan would like you to take this case. She has already told the police she will be hiring you. You have to find Emma's murderer for Joan's sake and for the trust. We'll take the evening train. I'll pick you up from the office in one hour. We'll stay at Emma's home. Pack for a week."

After the staccato of commands, she marched out of my office. I rested my head in my arms for a moment. Then I pressed the intercom. "Robyn, Aunt Helena just left. Pack a bag. We leave in an hour."

Aunt Helena's secretary, Gregory, was waiting at the train station for us with our tickets. The train left the station moments after we arrived. Aunt Helena did not like to wait and timed her arrivals to coincide with the instant of her departures. Gregory was another of Aunt's projects—a thin, sad-eyed poet who had never been published. He, his fish tanks, and cartons of overdone verses lived in an apartment above Helena's garage.

Helena sat next to me. Gregory sat as far from me as possible. No matter what Aunt Helena said, Gregory believed in all my diseases. He sat on the other side of Robyn Cardex, a cousin of mine also subject to the terms of our uncle's trust and an assistant investigator at the agency. She had a degree in Victorian literature and was grateful for a position that satisfied the conditions for the monthly checks. She was working on her master's degree at the local university. I enjoyed introducing her as "my assistant Robyn Cardex, a colleague cousin attending Cutter College." As I rested my head against the seat and the countryside whipped by us, I was suddenly struck with the thought that soon she would be finished with her degree and ruin my alliteration exercise. I opened my eye and fixed her with it.

"You will go for your doctorate next," I said. She and Helena exchanged a startled look. I closed my eye.

It was a three hour train ride. With my usual skill and two of Dr. Stout's pills, I managed to sleep through most of it. Whenever I was awake, I

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could hear Helena telling Robyn about poor, dear Joan and how distraught she must be over her godchild's death. How poor, dear Joan had survived middle class destitution in an unfortunate marriage after she had been raised in a fine and literate home. Her grandfather had been the founder of Wisconsin's Jane Austen Literary Club and Tea Hour—a rival to the prestigious Jane Austen Society. He had even seen the back of the great lady in London as a child. Of lesser note, he had also been one of the richest men in the country. At one time, the Williams family had owned much of the county. He had influenced the naming of the town and much of the surrounding environs with his love of Austen. An eleven year marriage to a bookkeeper with an affinity for professional bowling had been purgatory for poor, dear Joan. She was now living in a small apartment in town, not far from her childhood home, Northanger Abbey. Her father had given the Abbey to Emma when Emma (christened after Austen's heroine, of course) married.

Upon arriving in Mansfield Park, Helena swept out of the train, the rest of us following. I walked a little tentatively, as my cholera had reached the stage of intestinal cramping. I planned to skip the more distasteful symptoms fortified with more of Dr. Stout's pills. The interesting, less repulsive effects of the disease I could enjoy to the fullest.

Joan Williams was waiting at the station for us. Gregory, Robyn, and I stood by silently while Aunt Helena and Joan exchanged sounds of bereavement. Finally Aunt Helena introduced us and eagerly asked about the state of the police investigation. Joan smiled at me. "Poor," she said. "They are nothing but fools. But as her genius, Jane Austen, says, 'It soon flies over the present failure and begins to hope again.' "

Aunt Helena nodded sagely. "Austen's *Sense and Sensibility,* of course."

"Actually, it's *Emma,* dear. But come—it is late. The car is just this way."

As we left the train station, I saw Joan eyeing me in the rear view mirror and assumed she was concerned over my wan demeanor. "I've had cholera for a week now," I said conversationally. She rolled down her window. I discussed my symptoms and the doctor's treatment with some enthusiasm for the rest of the journey. Gregory held a tissue in front of his nose. Aunt Helena read a book, and Robyn dozed.

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Mansfield Park was a small village in a rural section of east Wisconsin. Joan gave us a brief history of the area with evident pride. The Harris estate was four miles from the outskirts of town, on a hill overlooking the village. A small sign on a wrought-iron fence named the estate Northanger Abbey. The building did not look like an abbey; it was more of a colonial palace.

Although it was late, a retinue of servants and Martin Harris waited for us. Harris looked as if he too was enduring a bout of cholera. The young widower was pale and trembling. I would have wagered Aunt Helena did not have a maternal bone in her, yet she went all motherly at the sight of him. She and Joan ushered him into the house, clucking sentimental nonsense. We entered a parlor filled with antiques and wing back chairs. Carved oak bookcases lined the walls from floor to ceiling. When Joan and Aunt paused for breath, I shook his hand and introduced myself and Robyn to him. "This is my assistant, Robyn Cardex, a colleague cousin attending Cutter College, and I'm Micky Cardex, sometime sleuth. Excuse my appearance—I have cholera." Gingerly, he removed his hand from mine.

In the shadows of the room sat a large desk. My eye was caught by a movement, and as I stared, a lanky man unfolded himself from the chair and walked over to us. I recognized him immediately as one of the local police, detective variety. He had that official air of arrogance and a bulge at his side. Harris hastened to introduce Lieutenant John Neeling to us. Neeling barely glanced at Robyn or Aunt Helena. He glared at me. "Ms. Micky Cardex. I've heard of you and what you did to the Rostanovich case in Watertown. I can't prevent Mrs. Williams from wasting her money on you, but I will give you this warning. Mess with this case and I will have your head."

He turned on his heel and slammed out of the house, leaving a curious silence behind. "Well," Joan said uncertainly. I shook my head to clear travel and fever fuzz. Although everyone in the room was shifting in and out of focus, I was aware that they were staring at me. Harris cleared his throat twice but said nothing. I looked at the servant who seemed most like a housekeeper and suggested "Bed" in a croaking voice. The others remained in the parlor while I followed the housekeeper to the bedrooms above.

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The morning brought breakfast and a country, sunlit day. I filled my plate with invalid-mild food—a plain omelette, fresh fruit, and a slice of coffee cake. I lined up my bottles of medication between my almond-flavored coffee and apricot nectar. As I gazed out the window, I saw Robyn jog by. Because of the cholera, I had to forgo my early morning run. Pity.

A moment later Martin Harris joined me at the breakfast table. After a few halting attempts at pleasantries, he asked what my plans for that day would be.

I sorted through my pill bottles. "First thing—we need to see where the body was found."

"I'll call the Allans, Stan and Dee, and tell them to expect you. It's the second woodhouse on New Haven Court."

"Woodhouse?"

Harris smiled. "Sorry. Joan's term. She disparages anything not made of stone or brick. Look, I'm driving out that way anyway. Stan's gardener has some cuttings for me. May I drive you?"

We agreed to go immediately after breakfast and applied ourselves to the food.

Later I waited in the front hall for Harris, leaning against the door. My head was throbbing. I had sent Robyn to the Mansfield Park coroner's office and the local newspaper to gather information. As I glanced at my watch, Aunt Helena sailed through. She was pulling on her gloves and adjusting her hat. I straightened up apprehensively.

"Where are you going, Aunt Helena?"

"To solve the case, of course. With you moping about the place, someone must take matters into her own hands. I have studied the clues thoroughly and determined that the murderer can only be one person. I'm off to uncover the final bit of evidence, and then I'll have him."

"Who is the murderer?"

"Of course you'd like to know. Letting your elderly aunt dash about, going hither and yon, doing all your investigation . . . "

"Never mind, Aunt Helena. Have fun. I'll see you when you get back."

She leaned towards me, confidentially. "It's Stan Allan. I have conclusive evidence that it is him." She gave me a brisk nod and left the house with a wilted Gregory following.

After dropping me off at the front door of a small country estate, Harris drove around to the back of the house. Stan and Dee Allan were waiting at the

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door for me. They were a couple in their late twenties, slim, dark, and well-dressed. I quickly discovered that Stan had an unbreakable alibi. He had been in Europe with his partner, in constant company with either his German colleague or his partner while there. Dee, Emma's friend, had been the one to find Emma's body. She was still upset about it and reluctant to enter the kitchen where the body had been found.

She dabbed her watering eyes. In a faltering voice she described Emma's exemplary life. She was known for her business sense and her attention to detail. She was a volunteer for her church's food fund and a member of the town's ladies' Rotary. Everyone had liked her pleasant husband. She had been a member of every committee and club except the literary ones. She was a bit dull there, not even interested in the Austen influence in the village.

Dee had been staying with her parents the week Stan was in Germany. Martin Harris had called her at her parents' on Tuesday to tell her that Emma had disappeared. She had been very concerned. This was not like Emma, a model of predictability. When she heard again from Stan early Thursday morning that Emma was still missing, she was determined to return home to see if Emma had called and left a message. She entered through the kitchen—the door was never locked. She found Emma's body just inside the door. Her skull had been crushed and an arm turned at an impossible angle. Dee called the police and then had been sick in the kitchen sink.

I was to gather three important pieces of information in the course of my questioning: one, the gardener had been in Wyoming that week for a brother's funeral; two, Dee had been at her parents' house, a two hour drive, since Sunday evening; three, Emma had invested a tidy sum in Stan's business.

After Harris took me home, I found Helena and Robyn in the parlor having a midmorning respite of coffee and cake. I dragged my fever-ridden body to a chair and joined them. Helena was staring discontentedly into space. Robyn told me in undertones that Helena had found out about Stan Allan's alibi. Robyn gave me the background on another player in this case. The police report had been sketchy regarding Charles Hubbard, Emma's last appointment on the day she was murdered. Hubbard had

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been engaged to Emma before she met and married Harris. Although the broken engagement had been bitter on Hubbard's part, local gossip said he was over it and was engaged to marry next month. He ran his own travel agency in Briar Heights, a neighboring village. Emma had also invested in Hubbard's travel agency. When I murmured something about Lady Bountiful, Helena bridled.

Joan entered the room at this point and seemed pleased that Stan Allan had been cleared of suspicion. When I asked her about Hubbard, she looked thoughtful.

"Chuck was a dear boy—biddable and constant. I was hoping that he and Emma would marry, but Emma had a mind of her own."

Aunt leaned forward, her nose quivering, intent on the hunt. "It is imperative we see this man. We will go at once. Joan, have you anything to give us to trap him?"

" 'I have nothing to send by my love.' "

"Ah," said Helena triumphantly. *"Northanger Abbey,* of course."

"No, dear. *Persuasion."*

We found Charles Hubbard at his travel agency, still distraught over Emma's death. As a suspect, he was not in the running. He too had been in Europe, escorting a small tour group through the haunts of Eliot and Dickens. Europe appeared to be filled with people who had not killed Emma.

He talked about Emma's sweet, common-sense nature and how lovingly she had ministered to Joan after the breakup of Joan's marriage. For almost a month, Emma had let her godmother stay at Joan's childhood home before helping the poor woman move to the apartment in town. She was known for her charity work in the village. With friends, she was generous with both educated business advice and seed money for new ventures. Martin was another matter. He was weak in character, with a liberal arts degree and no job skills. He had wormed his way into the steady relationship that Hubbard had enjoyed with Emma and caused Emma to break off with Charles. In their few years of marriage, Martin had lived off his wife's fortune.

Back at Emma's, we worked our way through a sumptuous lunch. I was reviewing Robyn's notes on Marie Linder, a neighbor who had heard "strange noises" at the Allans' on Tuesday. She had seen a tall, shadowed figure walking slowly past the backlit window. As Linder was

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also known as the local crackpot, her call had been written into the police report and ignored. It was not mentioned in the newspaper. I glanced up from the notes to see Aunt's gleaming eyes resting on Martin. Hoping to distract her, I asked Joan about Linder. She meditated a moment on her sherbet. " 'Her opinions are all romantic,' " she said.

"Wonderful book," Aunt Helena said with enthusiasm. *"Pride and Prejudice,* of course."

"Actually, that was from *Sense and Sensibility,* dear."

The distraction did not work. Aunt's attention was focused on Martin for the rest of the meal. As we left the dining hall, she hissed at me that she was off on a new lead. Gregory threw me a hunted look as he followed her out the door. I closed my eyes as a wave of dizziness passed through me. When I opened my eyes, they were gone.

I spent the rest of the afternoon on the sofa in the library. My pills were arrayed on the table next to me, and servants came periodically to refill the coffeepot and cookie plate. Between worries over what Aunt was doing and staying close enough to the fire to allay the fever chills, I did manage to finish Robyn's notes. Neeling's report had contained some scurrilous remarks about Martin's work ethics and financial status. The brevity of his interview with Hubbard was explained by Robyn's marginal note. Charles was presently engaged to Neeling's sister. She had also included an interesting phone call transcription between Emma and her lawyer about the possibility of placing a lien against the Allans' home. Robyn then diagrammed notes on Austen's books and characters to assist me in translating Joan's allusions.

I was perusing Jane Austen's *Emma* when Martin and Joan joined me for pre-dinner drinks. I had just sent Robyn to the phone upstairs to try discreetly to locate Aunt when there was a commotion at the door. Aunt Helena entered triumphantly with the police detective, John Neeling, in tow. Neeling immediately walked over to Martin and read him his rights. I stood up weakly, and asked the lieutenant on what grounds he was making the arrest.

"Your aunt has found the murder weapon—a mallet was discovered in the corner of his garage. It still had traces of hair and blood on it: his wife's hair and blood." He manacled Martin, who was pale and shaken. "Ms. Cardex, your

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aunt has done a great thing for our community."

Aunt preened herself modestly while arranging herself on a chair. I sat down slowly, frowning. The food here was excellent and the surroundings commodious. I had hoped to draw this case out longer, but I disliked seeing an innocent man imprisoned.

"It was not Martin who killed Emma," I said to Neeling. Martin nodded and voiced a vigorous agreement. Joan shook her head sadly and turned to Neeling.

"What could plainly speak of guilt, but a husband's protestation of innocence?"

"What I don't understand," I mused, "is why he would take the body to the Allans'? Why not just leave it in the garage?"

John Neeling and Aunt exchanged a pitying look. "To divert attention from himself, of course," Helena said. "Really, Michaela, one would think you were new to the detection business."

"I rather think her body was left there as an ironic note," Joan offered kindly. We stared at her blankly. "Because it was in a woodhouse, of course."

Aunt nodded. "Joan, you are a rare one. Jane Austen's *Emma* was Emma Woodhouse. A brilliant deduction, dear."

I mumbled under my breath, "I detest murders with a theme."

As Neeling urged the wan and protesting Martin to the door, I pulled myself out of the chair again. "Sir, it was not her husband who killed Emma Harris, but her godmother, Joan Williams."

In the ensuing pandemonium, I picked up Robyn's notes on the case. I cleared my throat, and it was suddenly quiet. "This house did not originally belong to Emma Harris but had been built by Joan's grandfather as a memorial to his favorite author, Jane Austen. Joan's father gave it to Martin and Emma Harris when they married with the provision it would revert back to Joan if Emma predeceased her. It would have been difficult to see her family home occupied by those who did not care for Jane Austen or her books."

Joan had sat frozen since I named her Emma's murderer. Now she spoke. "She was poorly named. The real Emma was spirited and intelligent. Emma Harris cared for nothing but her money. This was my home, not theirs."

John Neeling walked over to her and took her arm gently. "I'm sorry, ma'am, but I must ask you to come with me."

Martin Harris shook my

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hand gratefully as they took Joan away. "When did you discover it was Joan?"

I smiled at him apologetically. "I knew before I arrived here. 'You may be wondering why all this was not told you last night. But I was not the master enough of myself to know what could or ought to be revealed.' " I sighed. *"Pride and Prejudice,"* I said. "And this case has had too much of both."

Later that evening, on the way to the train station, Aunt Helena glared at me. "I may never forgive you for this. Who will chair the Club refreshment committee now? No one could do it as well as Joan."

"Better yet—who will be paying us?" asked Robyn gloomily.

"Taken care of," I assured her, downing my daily draught of diarrhea inhibitor. "Martin was relieved enough with the results of our investigation to offer payment and a small bonus."

On the train, Aunt Helena sulked in her seat. Robyn frowned over her case notes while Gregory stared out the window, heaving melancholy sighs. My fever had finally broken, and I was feeling the euphoria peculiar to the newly well. I sifted happily through *Biddle's Medical Encyclopedia.* One never knew what lay around the corner—intrigue, betrayal, madness, or murder. It was enough to content myself with the structure of planned goals and familiar risks. So with a sense of well-being and a finger tucked in *Biddle's,* I looked up at my companions.

"So what's next? Something parasitic, perhaps?"

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THE MYSTERIOUS PHOTOGRAPH



Henri Silberman, N.Y.C.

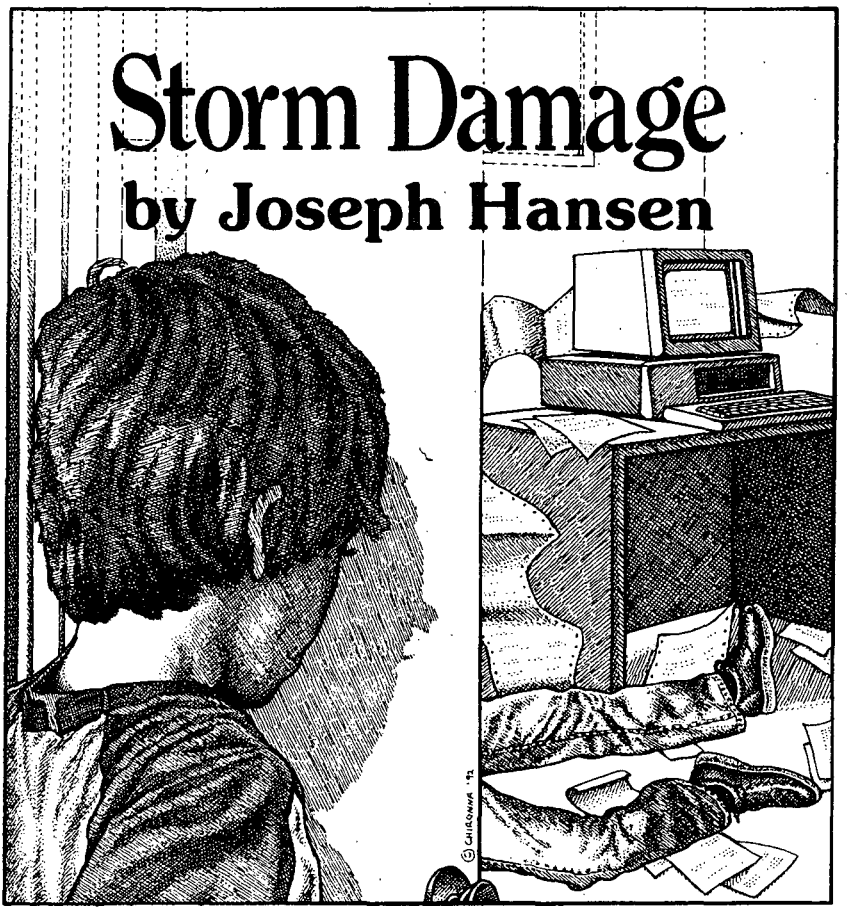
An unclear case of crookedness. We will give a prize of $25 to the person who invents the best mystery story (in 250 words or less, and be sure to include a crime), based on the above photograph. The story will be printed in a future issue. Reply to Alfred Hitchcock Mystery Magazine, 380 Lexington Avenue, New York, New York 10168-0035. Please label your entry "November Contest," and write your name and address on the story you submit.

The winning entry for the June Mysterious Photograph contest will be found on page 155.

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Storm Damage

by Joseph Hansen



The storm kept waking me. The wind blew hard. It drove the rain hard. Thunder cracked and rumbled. Lightning flared. We're not close neighbors with anybody, but looking out from my darkened room, I could see a couple of lighted windows through the trees. People were too nervous to sleep. Then a tree fell somewhere and the power went off.

Arlene yelled to me, "Don't panic, Jason." As if I was five years old. Hell, I'm fourteen. She'd been in the front room. I heard her blunder along the hall to the kitchen, and in a min-

Illustration by Ron Chironna

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ute she was at the door of my room with a kerosene lamp in her hand. We kept three of them. Always filled. Power outages happened a lot in Settlers Cove. She hadn't changed for bed. She wore corduroy jeans, scuffed suede boots, a big old bulky sweater, and a watch cap. The lamplight showed tears on her face, and I scrambled out of bed.

"What's wrong?"

"Sam's still not home."

I looked at my watch. "It's only a little after midnight. He's drinking someplace—Schoonover's."

She shook her head, bit her lip. "I've been on the phone. He's not at Schoonover's—he's not anywhere."

"What about Cap's Pier?" Cap Willard takes people out on boats to fish, and rents them gear, and sells them bait, and all that. My father, Garland Moore, used to be a pilot for Cap. They were friends, they still are. But Garland lives in San Francisco now. Alone. He and Arlene got divorced. Sam Dexter is my stepfather. He came to know Cap through my real dad. "Did you try Cap's?"

"Often. But I only get the answering machine." She headed back toward the kitchen. "Cap is probably out with the Coast Guard, trying to help them find Sam's boat."

I shivered. The night was cold, and I got my bathrobe. Gusts of wind kept slamming against the house, shaking it. The rain hit the windows like gravel. The trees creaked. I went down the dark hall to the soft light in the kitchen.

I said, "You don't know for sure Sam took a boat out. There were storm warnings all day. I heard them on Miss Touhy's radio in the gym."

I went to see what Arlene was doing at the stove. She'd poured two mugfuls of milk into a pan and was heating the milk carefully, stirring it to keep it from boiling.

I said, "Sam must have heard them, too."

She sketched me a smile. "I hope so."

I took down the orange-colored Ghirardelli's box from a shelf and spooned double helpings of powdered chocolate into two mugs. I was going to enjoy this. It was a long time since Arlene and I had been alone at night in stormy weather sitting here drinking cocoa together by lamplight.

I was sorry she was worried about Sam, but I couldn't see why, really—the way he treated her. If you want the truth, I hoped she was right and he had gone out fishing today, like he planned, that the storm had caught him, a big

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wave had swamped the boat, and he'd drowned. You weren't supposed to feel that way about anybody—I knew that. But I couldn't help it. Sam Dexter was a son of a bitch.

Arlene poured the hot milk into the mugs while I stirred it into the cocoa powder. She set the pan in the sink, where it sizzled. When the brown powder dissolved in the milk, I took the mugs to the table and set one down for her and one for me. She was in her chair, but now she got up.

"Where are you going?"

"I'd better try Cap Willard again." The phone is on a little chest in the hall. There were soft beeps as she punched the lighted buttons. After a minute, she told the answering machine her name. "It's after midnight. I'm worried about Sam, Cap. Call me as soon as you can."

He called. But not till we'd drunk the cocoa and washed the pan and the mugs and put the mugs on the shelf again and turned the lamp down very low, and I'd gone back to bed and fallen asleep in spite of the racket the storm was making outside. There's a clock by my bed with big red LED numbers but of course that wasn't working, and there was no way to read my watch, so when the phone woke me, I didn't know how late it was. I heard Arlene run to snatch up the receiver. I scrambled out of bed, opened my door, stood watching her. Her face lit up.

"Oh, thank God," she said. "Thank God."

And half an hour later, good old Sam was home. The boat he'd taken out with two drunk friends had lost its rudder and wallowed for hours in high seas, but the Coast Guard had located it before it sank. Just before. It was the *Argo*. Named that because my name is Jason, and Cap Willard took delivery on it the day I was born. Jason was an ancient Greek who went to sea in a ship called *Argo* to find the Golden Fleece. Cap told Garland the boat was mine as soon as I grew up. And now Sam Dexter had sunk her. Arlene was crying with relief, getting the wet clothes off him, toweling his hair, wrapping him in a blanket, giving him coffee. I was crying, too. Luckily, neither of them asked me why.

Carlotta Wright is my grandmother. She drives a Bronco and lives up in Sills Canyon. Apples—she raises apples. You say the word grandmother to people and they get the idea of somebody creaky and frail

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and bent over, but that's not Carlotta. She's sturdy and rosy, and there's not a gray hair on her head. What I'd liked her best for when I was little was her apple pies, but what I liked her best for now was that she hated Sam Dexter as much as I did. Once at the jail, after he'd beaten Arlene up, Carlotta told him if it ever happened again, she'd kill him. And she meant it. She went and bought a revolver. I know. She showed it to me the next time I was at her house.

Anyway, around seven the morning after the storm, Arlene and I were eating breakfast in the kitchen, being very quiet about it because Sam was still asleep, when Carlotta slammed the door of the Bronco out behind the house and came charging in with mud on her boots.

"Well, he nearly got his comeuppance this time, didn't he?" She unwrapped a red wool muffler from around her throat and let the long ends hang down. "Drunken fool."

"Hush, Mother. You'll waken him. He's exhausted."

"Hah." Carlotta marched to the stove and poured herself a mug of coffee, brought it to the table, pushed my schoolbooks aside to make room for it, and plunked herself down. "I'm not sorry for him. It's the Coast Guard boys I'm sorry for. In a storm, I always keep the shortwave on. I heard the whole stupid affair. Sam Dexter endangered the lives of half a dozen brave officers and men with his craziness."

"He's alive, Mother," Arlene said. "That's what they're out there for. To save lives. I'm sure they didn't mind."

"Didn't mind?" Carlotta snorted. "In weather like that?"

Arlene said to me, "Jason, what's the matter? You've hardly touched your food. It's a cold day. You can't go to school on an empty stomach."

"Not hungry," I mumbled.

"Sam's all right." She stroked my hair. "Everything came out all right. There's nothing more to worry about."

I wasn't worried. I hadn't been worried. But of course I couldn't say that to Arlene. I'd tried telling her what I thought of Sam before. She never let me finish. She said he'd been good to us and I had no right to hate him so. That was her answer every time. I'd given up. But I had to tell somebody. I really felt very bad. I turned to Carlotta.

"It was the *Argo* he sank," I said. "It was my boat."

The sky was blue with only long, drawn-out trails of cloud all morning. But by noon the

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temperature had dropped again, and the sky had darkened. Westward, far out over the Pacific, thunder muttered. From the schoolgrounds where I sat on a bench under a big old eucalyptus tree, not eating my lunch—not even opening the bag to learn what was in it—you can't see the ocean. But I knew from times past that there'd be lightning flickering under the black low-hanging clouds out there. Sometimes these storms never make it ashore. I tested the wind with my finger. This one would.

Sean Touhy sat down beside me. In jogging pants, a duffel coat, and a green knitted ski cap. Her cheeks and the end of her nose were rosy from the cold. She's the gym teacher. And the art teacher and the drama teacher. She thinks I'm good at all of these things and pays me more attention than she should. The kids are always sniping at me about it. "Not shooting baskets today." She touched the lunch bag. "Not eating, either. Sick?"

"I'm all right," I said.

Jeff Van Slyke in Nikes that looked like dirty bandages dribbled the ball across the tarmac that was patchy with damp in places and strewn with twigs and pods and leaves blown from the trees. "Your old man, the drunk, nearly bought it last night," he said. "It was on the news this morning."

"He's all right," I said, "but he's not my old man. He's only my stepfather."

"Yeah, yeah," Jeff said, and dribbled the ball away, and tried a hook shot, and missed.

"What happened?" Sean Touhy said.

I told her. "I wish he'd drowned."

She spoke my name sadly and patted my shoulder. She didn't do more than that for fear of overstepping the guidelines—what's okay for a teacher to do and what's meddling. She'd meddled once and almost lost her job.

Sam had come home on a rampage and started a terrible fight with Arlene. I'd been showing her some drawings I'd made at school to illustrate a book about gray whales our class was writing. I yelled at him to quit hitting Arlene. So he went for me. I scrambled out of there. He chased me, but he was drunk and fell down. I got my bike to find a phone and call the sheriff, but the front tire was flat. So I hid up in the trees. When the house got quiet again and I tiptoed back inside, the drawings were all torn up and kicked around on the floor.

When Miss Touhy asked me for them next day, I should have made up some story, but

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instead I told her the truth. And she went to our house, where Sam has his office, and read him the riot act. She got real emotional about how brainy and talented I am, and how if he kept abusing me, she'd put a stop to it, and like that. Well, in the days before he boozed his good name away, he used to be a member of the school board—so he went to the principal and tried to get Miss Touhy fired. Since at that time he was thought to be a reformed character, it almost worked. I guess you can't blame her for being cautious about discussing Sam Dexter with me.

"You don't need to say it." I looked into her eyes, pink-rimmed and teary from the cold. "I know how you feel."

She gave a short laugh and stood up. "Poor old Jason." She wiped her nose with a crumpled Kleenex. "I sincerely hope you don't."

In American history class, Sandra the Rabbit brought me a note from the office. Even when she doesn't have messages to deliver, she jogs. Everyplace, not just at school but all over town. That's where she got the nickname. She's seriously overweight, and her plan is to jog the fat off, but jogging only makes her hungry, and eating just puts the fat back on.

Anyway, after she handed me the note, panting, and jogged out of the room, everybody was quiet, watching me, including Croaker Cogan, the teacher, so I opened the note and read it. It said my mother had been unexpectedly called out of town, and I was not to go home after school: I was to go stay with my grandmother till she got back. I frowned at the note. Who would call Arlene out of town? She grew up around here. She didn't know anyone anyplace else—not that I ever heard of. What did "out of town" mean, anyway? Where to? Garland lives in San Francisco. Was he sick or hurt or something? Even if he was, would he send for Arlene?

In his croaky voice, Mr. Cogan said, "I take it Jason's note doesn't mark a new epoch in American history, so perhaps we can go on now with Lewis and Clark."

Cogan was right—it didn't mark a new epoch in American history, but it marked a new epoch in mine. At the end of last period, I went to the office to check up on the message. But Sticks Everly, the tall, thin woman in charge, said the note was exactly what my mother had said. Sticks was rattling a computer keyboard while charts came up on the screen,

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then craning forward to peer at them through horn-rimmed glasses.

"Was she all right?" I asked.

"She didn't say she was ill," Sticks said.

"How about upset?" I said. "Did she sound upset?"

"She seemed to be calling from a pay phone," Sticks said. "On the highway. I heard trucks roaring past."

I felt cold in the pit of my stomach.

"Isn't it likely something about your stepfather?" She threw me a glance that said I wasn't using my brain. "After all, he had a terrible experience last night." With a ballpoint pen, Sticks made a note on a paper chart on the desk, then turned to the computer again. "She did seem worried about one thing. She stressed it several times."

"What was it?" I asked.

"That you were not to go home," Sticks said. "That you were to go straight to your grandmother's."

"Thank you," I said, and left the office.

Outdoors the sky was smudgy with low clouds, and the wind smelled strongly of the ocean. I pulled the hood up on my parka and headed for the bike rack, thinking it was probably something about my stepfather, all right, but not the way Sticks meant. Maybe after I left for school and Carlotta went home, Arlene took after Sam about my boat. She goes into this mother-bear-protecting-her-cub act sometimes. Mainly Sam isn't jealous of me, he just ignores me. But when she brings me up to him, he can get vicious. I unlocked the bike from the rack, dropped the lock into my pocket, hunched my bookbag on my back, and rode off. For home. She was probably afraid if I went there Sam would hurt me. But if I was going to stay at Carlotta's, I had to take clothes.

Riding along, my ears beginning to ache from the cold even with the hood up, I puzzled as I often did what it was about Arlene and alcoholics. See, Garland drank, too. Did he ever. Only Garland never got mean like Sam. He was a sweet drunk. People liked him. They just got tired of his not showing up for work, until the only person who would hire him was Cap Willard. And the little Cap could pay him, he drank away. He just couldn't remember there were bills to pay. But he loved Arlene, and Arlene loved him and put up with him for a long time. So did I. He wasn't around much, but when he was, he gave me smiles and hugs

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and even sometimes took me with him up the canyons hunting, or out fishing on the *Argo*.

Garland never meant anybody any harm. But he did harm. And when he stole and blew away the money Arlene had earned waitressing—she would waitress when there wasn't any food left in the house and they'd turned off the electricity and telephone, and the taxes had to be paid or we'd be homeless—she said he'd have to quit drinking or she'd kick him out. It's her house, a gift from Carlotta.

And so Garland joined Alcoholics Anonymous and never took another drink. And changed. Some people think it's funny, but it isn't, not to me. He was a different man. A distant man. The laughter went. He was still gentle and sweet-natured, but he stopped joking, he never took his hunting and fishing stuff out of the closet again. He wore business suits. And not just the suits. He was all business. And the laugh people get is that once he stopped drinking, Arlene stopped loving him. And they got divorced.

He had a sales agency here for a while and chalked up such a record the company gave him the San Francisco office to manage. Meantime, he'd introduced Arlene to Sam Dexter, the man who had been a special help to him in kicking the bottle, the guy you call up in the middle of the night when you think you're going to die without a drink.

At that time, Sam had a good job with a big salary, and like I said, he was on the school board and stuff like that. Even so, I thought he was a nerd. And I don't know anything about love, but on TV I've seen people marry on the rebound after they're divorced and lonely, and that's what Arlene did with Sam. I think. Anyway, they got married.

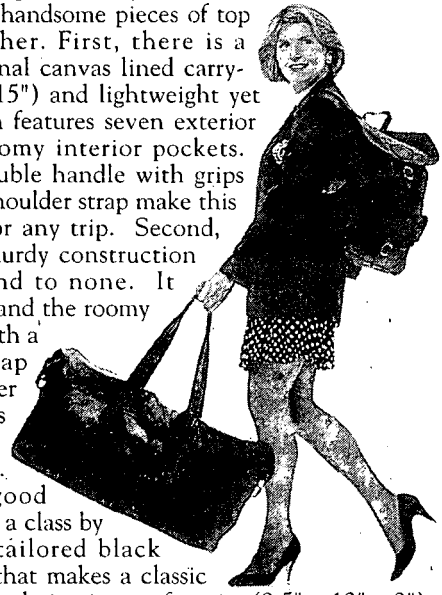
And then, a year later, the company where Sam was such a bigshot went belly up, and everyplace he applied to for work said he was overqualified, and he started drinking again. Secretly at first. But after awhile not bothering to keep it secret. And daring Arlene to say anything about it. He was mean, the way he talked to her. But that was as far as it went for awhile. He took spot jobs keeping the books for small businesses, starting with Cap Willard's, and began to earn a living again. I figured he'd stop drinking then, but he didn't. He wasn't the head honcho any more, issuing orders to a department full of peons—and that rankled. And soon it wasn't just words he hit Arlene

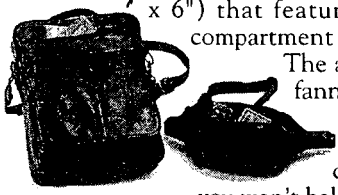
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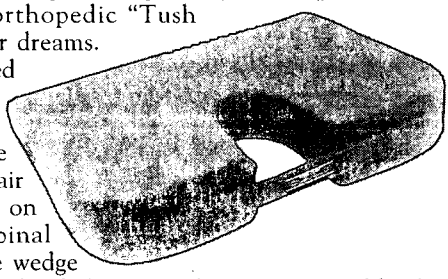


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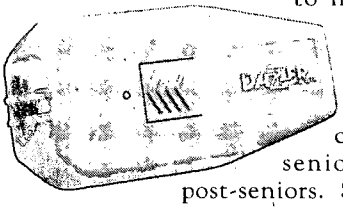
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with. But you already know that.

Like I said, our place is back in the pines, and pretty isolated. Our road doesn't get a lot of traffic, so I was pedaling the last stretch right out in the middle of the road when a car came fast around the bend, a gold Mercedes. I swerved one way, and it swerved the other way with squealing tires, and we missed each other. But I wobbled and the bike fell over and spilled me. Not because I was scared. I was shocked. The driver of the car was Garland. My father. He hadn't come to Settlers Cove in a couple of years. What was he doing here? I must have been wrong. I was a little dizzy, getting back on my bike, and I remembered I hadn't eaten all day. I was always privately wishing Garland would come back. He never would.

When I pedaled up the driveway the first drops of rain began to fall. Sam's Thunderbird was in the garage but not Mom's ten-year-old Wagoneer that used to be Carlotta's. Mom was gone, all right. But called out of town? No, that was a lie, and it worried me. Had Sam hurt her so badly she'd run away to save her life?

Except for the whisper of the rain in the trees, everything was deadly quiet. I prayed Sam was drunk and passed out. I sure as hell didn't want to wake him, and I was very quiet using my key and hardly breathed while I passed through the silent rooms. I stuffed a canvas airline bag with T-shirts and briefs and socks, clean jeans, a couple of favorite shirts. I zipped the bag shut. On the desk was the wooden case I keep my pencils and brushes and paints in. And I'd need my sketching pad. And books to read. And music to listen to—my Walkman and a bag of tapes.

Hell, it wasn't going to work. I couldn't take all this junk on my bike. It would be heavy, and it's a long ride to Carlotta's, most of it uphill. I tiptoed into the hall to phone her. Maybe she'd come pick me up. But the phone rang and rang, and she didn't answer. And then, just holding it to my ear, listening to it ring, I turned, and this way I could see the door to Sam's office. It was half open. Beyond it, the computer monitor glowed blue.

And I saw a pair of legs stretched out on the floor. My heart gave a thump. I put the receiver back, crossed the living room, stopped in the den doorway. Printouts and other business papers strewed the floor. Sam hadn't passed out drunk. Blood had soaked the

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papers under his head. He lay in front of the desk, his face turned away from me. And the back of his head was a bloody mess. He was dead, had to be. My stomach heaved. I ran to the bathroom, hugged the toilet, and breathed slowly in and out until the sick feelings left.

Then, avoiding even looking toward the den, I went back to the phone. Emergency numbers are on a printed label glued to the instrument, and I started to punch out the one for the sheriff's station in Madrone, and then I stopped and put the receiver down.

What if, this morning, Arlene had fought back? What if she was the one who'd killed Sam? That would be a real reason to run away, wouldn't it? And her strict orders for me not to come home were because she knew Sam was lying here dead, and she didn't want me to be the one to discover the body. That added up, didn't it? I pushed the idea away.

But one just as bad took its place: what if it really was Garland I'd seen in that speeding car just now? Garland knew how things were going here because I'd telephoned him in a panic at least twice lately and begged him to come save us. He'd always said stuff like I was overexcited, and it would all be okay in the morning, and promised to come later. So what if he'd kept his word today? What if he chewed Sam out about how he was treating us, and Sam went for him, and Garland killed him? Garland is a lot bigger than Sam.

I took my hand off the phone. I couldn't call the sheriff on my own mother and father. What should I do? Carlotta wasn't home. Who could I ask for advice? I picked up the receiver and punched out the number of the school. Miss Touhy usually stays late, taking the teams through practice. Not today. She had a cold, and she'd left early.

I yanked a blanket off my bed and, trying not to look at him, went into the den and covered Sam up. It was wrong to leave him lying there. But there was something very important I had to find out. I got my money out of the coffee can in my closet, picked up the airline bag, and left the house, wondering if I'd ever go back.

If it had been raining hard, I guess I wouldn't have made it, but the rain was scattered and fitful so I arrived at Cap's Pier only half drowned. The *Emily,* old, broadbeamed, rocked and pitched beside the pier. Gulls perched on her, looking miserable. The pier shook from the

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storm tide swirling around its stakes. I felt an ache in my chest, looking at the empty place where the *Argo* used to moor. Tears came to my eyes, and I was boiling mad at Sam all over again. But he was dead, now, wasn't he, beyond my reach. If he'd ever cared how I felt, he didn't care any more.

A big old wreck of a man, Cap sat at the cluttered desk in his shacky office that was hung with all kinds of ship's tackle, lines, pulleys. Fishing rods stood in racks. Rolled sails were stacked against the wall. Shelves sagged with engine parts, radio parts, galley supplies. The air smelled of bait. Cap was shuffling bank statements. I cleared my throat, and he looked up with his faded blue eyes.

"Come in," he said, "I've been expecting you."

"You shouldn't have let him take the *Argo,*" I said.

"I wasn't here. Place was locked up. Didn't learn he took the *Argo* until he'd been out for hours. Not the stupidest thing I ever knew a man to do, but close. Close."

I was relieved. I wanted to go on liking Cap. I went and sat by the desk. "You didn't let him, then."

He shook his head in its greasy old captain's cap. "Somebody came into Schoonover's and said did I know one of my boats was missing. First I heard. Four in the afternoon. Dark, windy, rainy. Surf way up. You know how it was."

"You would have stopped him," I said.

"I'm sorry it had to be the *Argo,*" he said.

"I guess you couldn't help it," I said. And then I asked the question I'd come all this way for. "Was Garland here today?"

"Garland?" There was no lights on in the place. I couldn't make out his expression in the gloom. But he sounded surprised.

"I thought I saw him," I said, "on my way home from school. Driving a car. Not far from our house. I thought maybe he'd come looking and found—nobody home. Was he here today? He wouldn't come all the way from San Francisco without stopping to see you. You were his best friend."

Cap had listened to me closely. When I quit talking, he waited a few seconds before he drew a breath and slowly nodded. "Yup," he said, "he was here."

"Great." I jumped up. "Where's he staying?"

Cap waved a horny, thick-fingered hand. "No, Jason, he's not. He was just driving through. Business trip. Like you said, he'd been to your

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house, but nobody was home. He sat and had a cup of coffee with me, then he headed back to Frisco. Busy man, now. Lots of responsibilities."

I made a face. "He didn't used to know the meaning of the word. Why didn't he come by my school?"

"No time. I told him you'd be hurt he didn't wait to see you," Cap said. "Especially considering how you just lost the *Argo* and the way you lost her and who lost her for you. I knew you'd be feeling bad."

He almost made me cry. I hung my head.

He said, "I'd like to say don't worry, we'll see you get another boat. But I'm not going to lie to you, Jason. Business is bad, not earning enough to pay the bills. I'm using up my savings. There's not going to be any new boat."

"It's okay," I said, but I felt hollow. All my life I'd dreamed of someday piloting the *Argo* around the world. Little kid stuff, right, not realistic. Anyway, now that I knew for sure Garland had been to the house today, I had grimmer worries. Should I tell Cap the whole story, and ask him what to do? I couldn't. Sitting there in the darkening room, he looked pathetic—old and defeated. I'd only lost a dream. The *Argo* had been his livelihood, half, anyway. He might not be able to keep going at all now. I couldn't load him with my troubles. He had too many of his own.

I was winded and my legs ached by the time I'd ridden up Sills Canyon to Carlotta's. I was also wet because the rain had come on in earnest. It was almost dark. Her garage door was down. I heaved it up. The Bronco stood there, shadowy, ticking while it lost heat. I could feel the heat. She hadn't been home long, had she. I leaned my bike against the wall, shut the garage door, unstrapped the airline bag from behind the seat of the bike, and went into the kitchen. The house was cold. Brown sacks of groceries sat on the table.

"Hello?" I called. "It's me—Jason."

I heard the toilet flush, and a minute later Carlotta appeared. She said, "Where did you come from? Look at you. You're soaked to the skin. Don't tell me you rode your bicycle all the way up here? Oh, Jason."

"Sam is dead," I said. "And Arlene's gone."

"What?" The rosiness left her face. Staring at me, she groped for a chair and sat down. "What did you say?"

"She phoned the school and

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left word for me not to go home, to come and stay here until she came back."

"Back?" She couldn't seem to take it in. "From where?"

"She didn't say. But I went home. I mean, I had to, didn't I? To get clothes. And Sam is lying dead on the floor in the den, Grandma. There's blood. His head is bashed in, blown away, I don't know."

"Oh my God," she said. "Oh my God."

"I didn't know what to do," I said. "I tried to phone you, but you weren't here."

"Go put on dry clothes." She stood up, the chair legs stuttering away behind her. "I'll phone the sheriff."

"Don't," I yelped. "He'll think Arlene did it."

She had the kitchen phone down from the wall. But she turned back and stared at me.

"Because she ran away," I said. "That's, like, an admission of guilt. That's the way the police mind works."

Her laugh didn't have humor in it. "Honestly, Jason—life is not a television show." She punched the number. Waiting for someone to answer, she said to me, "When did Arlene phone this message to the school?"

"American history," I said. "One o'clock."

"And you got home at what time?"

"Three fifteen, three twenty."

"She may not even know Sam's dead," Carlotta said. That made me feel even worse about Garland than I had before. Now Carlotta said into the phone, "Yes, this is Carlotta Wright. Sills Canyon. Mmm, the apple ranch. My young grandson has just arrived here with the news that his stepfather is lying unconscious from a severe head injury at home in Settlers Cove. Excuse me?" Pause. "Jason Moore." Pause. "Sam Dexter. No—stepfather." Another pause. "Thirty-four eighty-seven Old Bridge Road. No, I'm afraid there's no one home. Do you want me to—" A final pause. "Yes, of course. Yes, we'll be here if we're needed." And she hung the receiver back on its wall bracket. Not on the first try. She missed on the first try. She looked at me.

"They'll be taking paramedics," she said. "It's the paramedics you should have phoned for."

"His skull was smashed," I said. "He couldn't be alive."

"You should have checked." She began taking cans and boxes and plastic bags out of the sacks and stowing them in refrigerator, freezer, cupboards. Her hands were shaking, and she was putting things in the wrong places. "You

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might have saved his life."

"I didn't want to save his life," I said, and sneezed.

"If you don't get out of those wet clothes," she said, "you'll lose your own. Oh, rats." She started off.

"Don't go," I said. "Where are you going?"

She stopped and looked at me with her head tilted. "Only to the car. I left the little bag from the drugstore. My medication." She half smiled, half frowned. "Jason—I'll only be a minute."

"No," I said. "Let me go." I'd begun to be afraid. I didn't know what of, but I was shaking inside. It was childish, but I was scared if she went out that door she wouldn't come back. I'd be all alone. First no Garland, now no Arlene, not even any Sam. I had to hang onto Carlotta. "You stay here," I said and darted out the door before she could stop me.

Carlotta doesn't lock doors. She's lived on the Central Coast too long. In small towns, and out in the boonies like this. There never used to be any crime here, and she can't get it through her head that somebody might walk in and steal from her or hurt her. Arlene and Garland used to try to tell her to lock up. So did Sam. She said she didn't want to live in that kind of world anyway.

So the Bronco wasn't locked. I pulled open the passenger side door and looked for a bag from the drugstore in Madrone. It would be white. They always were. It wasn't on the seat. She often set small stuff on the dashboard, but it wasn't there. Maybe it fell off. The Bronco's ceiling light had winked on when I opened the car, but it was feeble and the garage was dark. I groped around for the drugstore sack on the carpet, gritty the way the floors get in vehicles used for farm work. Back under the seat? Ah, there it was.

I reached for it, and my fingers brushed something else, something hard and cold. Metal. I drew the thing out. Heavy. A revolver. It gave off a sharp smell. I couldn't tell if it was the gun Carlotta showed me that time after Sam beat Arlene up so badly. But I guessed the smell meant it had been fired, didn't it? I felt sick again.

"Jason?" The door from the kitchen opened, and light fell into the garage, and Carlotta's shadow. I pushed the gun out of sight quickly. "Are you all right?"

"It was on the floor." I got out, slammed the door, and jiggled the little white sack at her. "It took me a while to find it."

"Thank you." She took the

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sack from me, set it on a counter, picked up my airline bag, grabbed my arm, and propelled me across the kitchen and down the hall. "Now, you take a hot shower, young man, and get into dry clothes. Then we'll have supper."

"What about Arlene?" I sneezed again and wiped my nose on my cold wet sleeve. "Where did she go? Where is she?"

"She'll telephone." Carlotta pushed the carry-on bag into my hands. "She'll want to know you got here safely." Carlotta ran down the zipper of my parka, turned me around, and yanked the parka off me. "I'll ask her where she is."

"But what if she doesn't call?" I said. "What if she's too scared of the police? They might tap this phone."

"Jason," Carlotta said sharply, "please stop. She probably doesn't even know Sam's been hurt. I'm sure there's a perfectly simple, harmless explanation for this—trip she's taken." She clucked. " 'Scared of the police,' indeed." She reached for me. "Now, you get out of those wet clothes, or I'll get you out of them myself. You want me to bathe you? I did that when you were little, many a time. I can still manage, if you can't do it yourself."

I backed off. "I'll do it."

"I should hope so," she said and closed the door on me.

The storm was going strong when the man in the black slicker and sou'wester arrived. It must have been around seven. Carlotta and I had just finished off half an apple pie for dessert when the doorbell rang. My heart jumped again. I dropped my fork. Carlotta looked at me. Gravely. Pale-faced. She didn't get to her feet. I think she wanted to, but fear kept her from moving. I got up. My legs felt watery, but I made them work. My napkin was still tucked in at my collar. As I passed, without a word Carlotta mechanically reached out and pulled it off me.

I switched on the porch light and opened the front door, and rain and cold blew in. The man in black flashed a badge, said he was Lieutenant Gerard, and could he come in, please.

"It's about your father," he said.

"Come in," I said, and he did, and I shut the door and told him, "but he's not my father."

He busied himself getting out of the wet rain gear and draping it on a brass hanger by the door. He took off the sou'wester. He was getting bald.

His uniform was tan and

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neatly pressed, but the cuffs of the trousers were wet. "Is your mother here?"

"No, I'm his grandmother —Carlotta Wright." She came forward. "How is Sam?"

Gerard looked doubtfully at me. Was I too young to hear this—that was what he was wondering.

"He's dead, isn't he?" I said.

Gerard looked over my head at Carlotta. "He'd been dead for hours before you called us."

"What did I tell you?" I said to Carlotta.

She told the lieutenant, "Sit down, please. You look cold. Let me get you some coffee."

"Thank you." He sat down and looked at me. "When did you find him?" I told him. He asked, "You didn't see anyone else in or near the house when you got there?"

I swallowed hard and lied. "No. Sir."

"Why didn't you phone us when you found the body?"

"I—I thought an adult should do it." To my own ears, it sounded flimsy. "I was scared, mixed up. It's the first time I ever—saw a—dead person."

"Why didn't you call your grandmother? She's an adult. She could have called us."

"I tried. She wasn't home. So I rode up here. On my bike. She called you then. Well, it's a long way."

He eyed me with interest, as if he was hearing something he'd never heard before. New facts. "It takes two and a half hours to get here on a bike from Settlers Cove?"

"It was raining," I said weakly.

"You must have left the house later than you thought. Maybe you waited around, hoping your mother would come home."

"Yes, right." I nodded hard. "That's what I did."

"You're sure? You didn't go anywhere else before you came here? Looking for some adult friend?"

He was scary. How did he know that? He couldn't. He was bluffing. I shook my head. "I—I tried to phone my gym teacher at school. Miss Touhy. But she'd gone home."

He said, "Where is your mother, Jason?"

Before I could find an answer, Carlotta came in with mugs of coffee on a black tin Mexican tray painted with gaudy flowers. She set it on the coffee table in front of the couch where Gerard was sitting. He gave Carlotta a quick smile, picked up his coffee mug, and looked straight at me. Or through me. His eyes were steely. "Jason?"

"I—don't know. I'm worried about her."

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Carlotta sat down, looking rosy again and acting as comfortable as if she served coffee in her front room every week to sheriffs investigating murders in her family. But she didn't stay nonchalant long. Gerard said:

"I'm worried about her, too. There was a fight in that office. The blood there isn't only your father's—"

"He's not my father," I said hotly. "He's my stepfather."

"There's someone else's blood, as well. Two broken teeth. Handfuls of hair. They could be your mother's. We know Sam Dexter was a wife beater. We think he beat your mother again today." He glanced at Carlotta, then back at me. "If either of you knows where she is, please say so."

"I simply don't know." Carlotta looked crumpled and ready to cry. She shook her head helplessly. "Why didn't she come here? I wasn't home, but the doors are never locked. You've checked the hospitals, of course? And the halfway house for battered wives in Morro Bay?"

Gerard nodded. "All those places." He drank some of his coffee, reached to his breast pocket, paused. "May I smoke?" Carlotta waved a hand to say she didn't care, and he lit a cigarette. Then he said, "We used her phone book to check with her friends. No one's seen her. We're looking for her car. A 1982 brown Wagoneer, is that right?" He recited the license number.

"You think she killed him," Carlotta blurted.

"She couldn't," I said. "Not my mom. She can't kill anything, not even a bug. Anyway, she's not strong. And she's not brave. She's scared of him. She never fights back. He can do anything, and she just—" I shut up.

"Sometimes," Gerard said quietly, "meek people get fed up with being knocked around. And you don't have to be very strong to pull the trigger of a gun."

Before I could stop myself, I looked at Carlotta. She was sitting there stiffly, white-faced, just staring at him.

I said, "It looked to me like somebody'd bashed his skull in."

"That was the exit wound," Gerard said. "They can look that way. He was shot in the throat. At close range. It appears the murderer was someone Dexter knew and trusted. The bullet went upward and out the back of his skull."

"No," Carlotta said, "it couldn't have been Arlene. Not my little girl."

"There was no gun in the

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house?" Gerard said.

"We're not that sort of people," Carlotta said.

Gerard looked at me again, eyebrows raised.

"My real father kept a Winchester," I said, "for hunting, and he left it behind, but Mom sold it after the divorce. We were short of money."

"Mr. Dexter was shot with a handgun, .357 Magnum. We found the bullet. But not the gun." Gerard gulped the last of his coffee, put out his cigarette, stood up. "Thank you. For the coffee and for your help." He crossed to take his slicker down from the hook and shrug into it. The stiff rubber rattled and rustled. "If you think of anyplace Mrs. Dexter might have gone, please call me." He put on the sou'wester and pulled open the door. The storm was still out there, and it made a gusty try to come inside. Gerard closed the door against it and said to us, "I'm sorry, but we'll need a positive identification by a family member. It's the law. Mrs. Wright?"

"You mean going to the morgue," Carlotta said faintly, "and looking at the body?"

"I'll do it," I said. "Just to be sure he's dead."

Gerard gave me a startled look. But all he said was, "I'll send a car to pick you up tomorrow morning." Then he went back out into the storm.

My plan was to stay awake. I kept my clothes on under the covers. I tried reading one of the old children's books of mine Carlotta keeps in the room where I always sleep when I stay there, but my eyes kept falling shut. I was dog-tired from all the bike riding I'd done. And in a way that saved me. Leg cramps woke me. Bad ones. I wanted to yell. But I didn't want to wake Carlotta.

I sat up in bed wincing, whimpering, and kneaded my calves the way Garland used to do for me. And finally the pain eased a little. I switched off the reading light, got out of bed, hobbled to my door, softly cracked it open, and listened. Except for the patter of rain on the roof, the house was quiet. I put on my parka and, cautious, in my stocking feet, I passed Carlotta's door. Beyond it, I could hear her snoring. That was good.

I crossed the kitchen, went down into the garage, eased open the door of the Bronco, and got the revolver from under the seat. I didn't close the door tightly. It would make noise. In the kitchen, by the very small light on the stove, I found a plastic bag and wrapped the gun in it. Then I peeled off my socks and rolled

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up the cuffs of my jeans.

The rain was cold on my face, the planks of the rear deck cold under my feet. I didn't like going on, but I had to, didn't I? I went into the apple orchard where the trees were bare of leaves. I made myself stumble on over the lumpy ground, mud oozing between my toes, until when I looked back I couldn't make out the sleeping shape of the house any more. Then I squatted and dug with my hands in the soggy earth until I had a hole about a foot deep. And I buried the gun.

Sam was dead all right. That eased my mind a little as I walked out of the cold white room where they had him stashed in a kind of file drawer. A young woman deputy called T. Hodges, who was pretty, sort of, had an arm across my shoulders in case I needed comforting. I needed it, but not about Sam. Somebody I loved, somebody who loved me, had killed him. He'd asked for it. It was past time. I wasn't the least bit sorry. But law enforcement wouldn't care that Sam deserved to die. They went by the book, didn't they? Their job was to find and punish the killer. Arlene, or Carlotta, or Garland. I'd done what I could to protect Carlotta. I could only pray they wouldn't find Arlene. But Garland I could protect. So after the patrol car dropped me and my bookbag at school, instead of going straight in, I used a pay phone on the grounds to ring up Cap Willard.

"Cap, it's Jason," I said. "Please do me a favor."

"I'm sorry about Sam," Cap said. "That's terrible."

"Yeah, really," I said. Grownups are hypocrites. Cap only hired Sam to keep his books so Arlene wouldn't have to support us all alone on her waitress pay. And so I wouldn't starve. He didn't like Sam any better than I did. But they get pious when somebody dies. Especially the old ones. They can't help it, I guess. Maybe they figure if they speak the awful truth, then people will bad-mouth them when they die.

"What's this favor you want?" Cap said.

"Nothing hard," I said. "Just, if the sheriff comes around asking questions, don't tell him Garland came to see you yesterday, okay?"

"You don't think Garland shot Sam, do you?" Cap said.

"Of course not," I said, "but what I think doesn't matter. The thing is, not to put ideas in Lieutenant Gerard's head. He can't suspect Garland if he

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doesn't know Garland was around here yesterday. You and I are the only ones who saw him, so if we keep our mouths shut—"

The schoolbell rang for first period.

"I promise," Cap said.

Carlotta had been right—I shouldn't have gone to school. The kids looked at me sideways and whispered. The teachers tried not to show it, but I could see they thought I was the most unfeeling little bastard that ever walked. I couldn't leave—I didn't have my bike. I had to stay until three when Carlotta would come pick me up. So after second period, I went to the library. There were no kids in the library to look at me like I had AIDS. Busy at her desk, the librarian didn't even notice me. I went far back among the stacks and sat on the floor. In the quiet and the smell of old paper. To think.

I'd covered for Carlotta and Garland now, but what about Arlene? Lieutenant Gerard might never even get around to suspecting Carlotta and Garland, but he sure as hell suspected Arlene. She shouldn't have run off. On the other hand, she must have known what the law would think. She'd gone to them when Sam had beaten her. More than once. That would make her the number one suspect. That's why she'd run. How scared she must have felt, how scared she must be right now, all alone out there in the world someplace. Nobody to talk to, nobody to hold on to. I had to find her. Only where?

I don't like to admit it, but I fell asleep. It didn't matter—in fact, it helped. Because I dreamed. Of summer days we'd shared, Arlene and Garland and me, back when things were still all right between the two of them, before Garland's boozing turned things sour. We always went back to this same place, Cluff Meadows in the high Sierras, and the times there were always good. And I thought while I was still asleep, that's where she's gone. Where we were all so happy together. That's where I can find her.

And I woke up smiling.

I came out the doors at three o'clock—into rain, but still smiling. It was a hell of a long way, clear across the San Joaquin valley, away beyond Fresno. How I'd ever get there I didn't know, but the more I thought about it, the surer I got that Cluff Meadows was where Arlene had gone. So that was where I was going. Now I lost my smile.

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Carlotta was out there, all right, on the puddled parking tarmac with a lot of other parents and grandparents waiting to pick up their kids. But not in her Bronco. In a brown patrol car with a gold sheriff's badge painted on the door, and Lieutenant Gerard at the wheel. He tapped the horn, and feeling a lot of kids' eyes on me, I trotted over.

"What's wrong?" I said.

Gerard jerked his head to indicate the back seat. "Get in," he said. And when I did that, and slammed the door, he said, "Your friend T. Hodges checked gun registrations for me this morning." He started the car, and began backing and filling to drive out of the schoolgrounds. "And she found that your grandmother bought a gun eighteen months ago. A handgun. A .357 Magnum revolver." He glanced at Carlotta, who was fidgeting with her long red muffler. "She forgot to mention it last night."

"You didn't ask me," Carlotta said.

Gerard waited at the edge of the highway while cars raced past, their tires throwing up fans of water. When there was a break, he swung out across the highway and into the far lane. "It's the same type of gun that killed your stepfather." He held it up. "Recognize it?"

"Why would I?" I yelped. "I didn't shoot Sam."

"You had motive," Gerard said. He was kidding, wasn't he? "You had opportunity. You often visit your grandmother. You could have taken this gun out of the drawer where she keeps it without her noticing. When I went to ask her about it this morning, she hardly remembered where she put it after she bought it. You could have shot your stepfather and put it back when you reached Sills Canyon last night."

I could hardly speak. "You found it in some drawer?"

"The bottom drawer of my chiffonier," Carlotta said with a nod. "Under your great-grandma's patchwork quilts."

Then whose was the gun she'd hidden in the car, the gun I'd buried last night in the rain? Where had that come from?

I felt a chill that had nothing to do with the weather. She'd been out all yesterday afternoon. Had she gone back to the house on Old Bridge Road and found Sam dead and Arlene gone and the pistol lying there? Had she figured Arlene had got hold of a gun somehow and killed Sam with it? Had she been so sure of it that she snatched up the gun and stowed it under the car seat to protect Arlene?

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"Are my fingerprints on that gun?" I said.

Gerard stopped for the winking red signal that hangs way up above the highway at the turnoff into Madrone. He shook his head. "Only Mrs. Wright's." He swung the car up toward the little town and drove past the phony Hollywood Western set they've turned the main street into. He turned again, and we were at the sand-colored flat-roofed building of the county sheriff substation, where they hadn't raised the flags today because of the storm. Across the parking lot that was girded by a stand of big old eucalyptus trees, he parked the patrol car next to Carlotta's Bronco, revved the engine once, and switched it off. He tossed me a brief smile over his shoulder. "I'm not serious, Jason. This gun has never been fired. I'm not arresting you for murder."

"You could have fooled me." I opened my door.

"May we go home now?" Carlotta said coldly.

"I'm sorry for all the trouble," Gerard said.

She snorted and heaved herself out of the patrol car. "And so you should be. An old woman and a young boy." She rummaged in her big leather bag for the Bronco's keys. "How did a person with no better judgment than that get to be a lieutenant? Honestly. This generation!"

Gerard swung easily out of the patrol car and slammed the door. "A gun like this—" he came around the car to us, weighing the shiny thing in his hand thoughtfully "—can give an old woman or a young boy the same power as a man in his prime. And neither of you can claim you didn't want Sam Dexter dead." When Carlotta started to protest, he held up a hand. "You threatened to kill him, ma'am. I heard you. In this very building, the last time we jailed him for assault on Arlene Dexter."

"I'd lost my temper," she said. "I didn't know what I was saying. Surely you know that much about human nature."

He handed her the revolver. "You can put this back with great-grandma's quilts. We won't be needing it." After Carlotta had tucked it into that big shoulder bag of hers, he said, "You haven't heard from Mrs. Dexter? She hasn't telephoned? You still don't know where she is?"

"I'm frantic," Carlotta said.

"Me too," I said.

"Call me right away if you hear from her." He touched the brim of his hat politely to Carlotta, gave me another stiff little smile, and strolled off into the station house.

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As she drove us up Sills Canyon, the creek beside the winding road running hard and deep, Carlotta was very quiet, absorbed in her own thoughts. I said, as casually as I could, "I wonder what happened to the real gun."

"Real gun?" she glanced at me.

"The one that killed him," I said.

"Obviously," she said, fiddling with the switch of the windshield wipers, "whoever killed him took it away."

"Maybe not. Maybe that person heard somebody coming—" I was thinking of Garland "—and got rattled and forgot the gun. And whoever came next took it away."

She gave me a long look this time.

"Watch the road," I said.

She watched the road. "Why would this—hypothetical person do that, for heaven's sake?"

"Maybe they thought they knew who the murderer was, and they wanted to protect that person."

"Jason," Carlotta said, "you found it in the car, didn't you? I thought I was losing my mind—but you took it."

"I buried it. In the orchard. Nobody will ever find it." I looked at her. And for the first time I saw an old woman. "It was the worry, wasn't it, the strain?" I said. "I'm sorry I kept it a secret, but you kept it a secret from me that you already knew Sam was dead, that you'd been to the house and picked up that gun."

"You're too young to be burdened with such things."

"Yes, all right, and you shouldn't be burdened with lying—that's what I thought. If you didn't know where the gun was, you could say so when Gerard asked you, and it would be the truth."

"Thank you, Jason." She reached across and patted the side of my face. "Where did Arlene get that gun? When?"

"She didn't," I said. "Not that I ever knew of. Arlene didn't kill Sam, Grandma. She couldn't."

A deer bounded across the road. Carlotta jammed on the brakes and the Bronco's tires grabbed the pavement. It's times like that when you're glad for seatbelts. The engine stalled, and Carlotta was shaky, getting it started again. When we were rolling once more, she said, "She had every reason, she had every excuse."

"But she wouldn't," I said.

"Then she should come home," Carlotta cried.

"She will," I said. "She will."

It was early, I admit that. Not even six o'clock yet. So it's no wonder Sean Touhy squinted at me through her

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screen door like I was crazy. Her hair was tousled, and she was clutching a bathrobe closed at her throat. She shivered. The day was going to be fine and clear, but the sun hadn't had time to warm things up yet. She was barefooted. She stood on one foot, rubbing the other against the back of her leg.

"Jason Moore," she said. "What in the world?"

"I'm sorry," I said, "but it's an emergency."

"Dear God. Aren't you having more than your share?"

"Yes. I need your help."

"Come in." She pushed open the screen and turned away. "I'll get us some coffee."

"I already had some," I said.

"I didn't," she said and went out of the room.

I called after her, "I need a ride to the Kaiser River."

"What?" She didn't mean she hadn't heard me. She meant the suggestion was goofy. She appeared with a glass pot in her hand. "That's clear across the state, Jason."

"I know, but I have to get there, and I haven't got a driver's license." I dug into my pocket. "Here's forty dollars. For gasoline and something to eat on the way."

She gave me a thin smile and with a wag of her head went back to the kitchen, where I heard her rattling stuff. Then the kitchen went quiet. I sat down and picked up a copy of *American Artist* and looked through it while I waited for her to come back. I was fidgety. I couldn't spare the time. It would take hours to get there. We should be starting right now. I doubt she was gone ten minutes, but it seemed much longer to me. Finally, when I could smell coffee, the kitchen noises took up again, and soon she was there, washed, dressed, hair combed, with mugs of coffee and Danish pastries on a plate. She set these things on a coffee table and sat on the floor opposite me. She'd heated the pastries in the microwave. Butter swam on them. Hungry, I picked one up.

She said, "Now, what's it all about?"

With my mouth full, I said, "It's private. I'm sorry."

"You want me to drive you two hundred miles to the high Sierras, but you won't tell me why?"

"If you don't know, you can't get into trouble." I licked my fingers. "Look, it's a matter of life and death."

She eyed me thoughtfully. "The radio's been saying the sheriff is searching for your mother. They think she killed Sam Dexter, don't they?"

"Yes," I said, and washed the

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bite of Danish down with coffee. "But she didn't. I know she didn't."

"How do you know?" Sean Touhy said. "You weren't there."

"I know her. She wouldn't, she couldn't."

She said gravely, "He was very cruel to her, Jason."

"I know that," I shouted. "You think I don't know that?" I stood up. "Look, will you take me or not?"

"Is that where she's hiding? In the high Sierras?"

"You could ski," I said. "There's good snow up there now, after the storm."

"So much snow the roads are probably blocked." She got to her feet. "Jason, I'm your friend, but you know I can't do this. Whether she's guilty or not, she's a fugitive from justice, and I'd be breaking the law if I helped her."

"I'm not asking you to help her. Just get me to her."

"But what good can you do? You're not thinking."

"She needs somebody," I said, "she's all alone. She needs somebody who cares about her."

"Call the sheriff. There's a telephone. Tell him where your mother is. He'll bring her home. Back to you. And your grandmother."

"He'll lock her up," I said. "Lock her up for life."

"Not if she didn't do it," Sean Touhy said.

I gave a sour laugh, and headed for the door. "You believe that if you want to. Why do you think she ran and hid? She knows what they'll do to her, and so do I." I pulled open the door. "We'll go away together. We'll be all right." I gave her a smile. "Don't worry about us."

"Oh, Jason," she said sadly, "you are so very young."

"There'll be lots of skiers heading for the Sierras," I said. "Somebody will let me hitch a ride."

"Riding with strangers is dangerous," she said sharply.

"I'll be careful." I went out, then turned back. "Don't tell anybody about this, okay?"

"No one will ask me." She was in the doorway. "Jason, you're making a mistake. You have a good mind. Use it."

"No time," I said, and got on my bike.

Cap Willard didn't like traveling if it wasn't on the ocean. But the practical fact was, around here a person had to have wheels. His were attached to a rusty pickup truck, and he could drive it if he absolutely had to. If I couldn't get him to take me, I really would have to hitchhike, and to be honest, I

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was as scared of that as Miss Touhy was. So I headed up the coast road to talk to Cap.

Dressed in a yellow slicker and rubber boots, he was on the *Emily,* doing cleanup after the storm. Mainly hosing the salt-water off her. It didn't surprise me that he was up early. His days, at least when there was business, began at dawn. What surprised me, so much I nearly fell off my bike, was who he was talking to. Lieutenant Gerard stood on the dock.

I braked hard, swung off my bike, and crouched down behind some old crates and barrels. They were shouting so their words crossed the distance between them, but I couldn't hear what they were talking about. They were too far away, the surf was too noisy, the crying of gulls. I could guess, though. Trying to locate Arlene Dexter, Gerard was looking up everybody who knew her, and of course Cap had known her since before I was born. He'd been good friends not just with Garland but with her. And me. I hoped he wouldn't mention those summers we spent at Cluff Meadows.

I squatted there, praying Gerard would leave so I could talk to Cap, but instead, with a hand from Gerard, Cap climbed off the *Emily* onto the dock. The two men went into the office and shut the door. I figured Cap would make coffee and they'd sit there for hours, smoking and talking. Gerard would be less than human if he wasn't spellbound by the old man's stories. I was out of luck. I'd have to stand by the highway and stick out my thumb and just pray I wasn't picked up by some maniac child molester.

I wasn't. It was a leathery old woman turkey rancher driving a big dirty stake truck full of empty crates. She got me as far as Fresno before she took the highway south to Kingsburg. On the way, I learned more about turkeys than I wanted to know. For one thing, they stampede. Like if there's thunder or something. Maybe a fighter plane from the air base flying over low. Or just a truck backfiring on the road. And they all run to one side of the enclosure in a panic and suffocate each other. Then there were lots of details about the diseases they get. I'd rather forget it.

Anyway, in Fresno I stopped to eat, and some students from Cal Poly, two women and a dude, got out of a car with skis poking out of the hatchback. They came in and ate, and when they were paying their bill, I got up my nerve and

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asked them if they'd take me up in the mountains with them, and they agreed. They were really decent. It wasn't on their way, but they checked their map, found the right route, and dropped me at the access road into Cluff Meadows.

I'd never seen it in the snow. It was still beautiful, but different from the summer when there was lush grass and wildflowers. And of course there was sound all the time, the creek running, insects buzzing, birds calling. Now once the car was out of hearing, the place was silent. Across on the far side, I saw the cabin, up among the big pines. I think it belonged to people Garland knew. But they only used it now and then, and because we were always broke, they let him and Arlene and me use it free for those summer weeks.

I started toward it, taking the trail I remembered through the trees edging the meadows. I went by guess because the trail, like everything else, was deep in snow. The sky was clear, and the shadow that went with me was blue on the snow. My feet and legs got colder and colder until they went numb. I climbed onto a stump and rubbed my legs. My teeth chattered. I should have worn more clothes.

What if I'd been wrong? I'd wanted to find her. This was the only place I could think of. But that didn't make it the only place, did it? Hell, she could be in some motel, in any town, on any road the Wagoneer would take her, a no-name stranger nobody would pay any attention to. Why not? I was a dreamy kid. She'd told me that plenty of times. Miss Touhy had been right this morning—I hadn't used my brain. Why would Arlene come here in the cold and snow? Still—I was here. I'd better look. I climbed down from the stump.

I'd been slogging along with my head down so as not to lose my footing. Now I stopped, certain this was childish, ready to turn back, wondering how I was going to get home again—when I saw the Wagoneer. Just a corner of it. She'd parked it behind the cabin. I was so happy, I shouted. My voice echoed back to me in the white, empty, miles-wide silence. Then I began calling her name. "Arlene! Arlene! It's me. Jason." And I began to run. I stumbled and fell in the snow, and picked myself up laughing, and ran on, panting and gasping out, "Arlene, Arlene."

And when I was still a hundred yards off, the door of the cabin opened, and she was standing there in that lumpy old sweater and her corduroys,

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and holding up her hands against the sun glare on the snow, squinting, trying to see me. And then she did see me. And she came down the cabin steps and started running toward me with her arms out, laughing and crying. And then we were hugging, and we stayed out there kneedeep in snow for I don't know how long, just hugging hell out of each other, and laughing and crying.

At last she stood me away from her. She studied me, worriedly. Her face was all bruised and swollen out of shape. One eye was closed completely. When she talked, she sounded different. Because of those missing teeth, right? She said, "You're all right. They told you not to go home. Sam didn't get you? Oh, Jason, how mad he was. Insane."

I stared. "You don't know?" I looked at the cabin. "You haven't got a radio?"

"Only in the car. And it would run down the battery."

"Sam's dead," I said. "He was dead when I got home from school. I had to go there. I needed clothes. Somebody killed him, Arlene. Shot him in the throat."

"Dead?" She was, like they say, stupefied. She didn't know. I was so happy, I burst out crying. She hugged me again. "Jason, what's the matter?"

"You ran away, so they think you killed him," I said. "I told them over and over you couldn't have, but they didn't believe me."

"Poor Jason." Arm still around me, she headed the two of us toward the cabin. "Come on, let's get you warm."

"You were just running away from him," I said. "So he wouldn't beat you up any more."

"I wanted to bring you with me." We went inside and she closed the door. Fire burned in a potbellied iron stove. She sat me down beside it and knelt to unlace my shoes and pry them off. "But I couldn't go to the school, not looking the way I did." She laughed a wobbly laugh. "I'd have made everyone sick."

"Never again," I said. "That's over. He's gone."

She pushed my shoes under the stove. "I can't believe it." She got snow from outside and rubbed my feet with it. They stung from the blood coming back into them. "It'll take me days to believe it."

"Grandma's worried sick," I said. "Couldn't you phone?"

"There's no phone here. And the service road's snowed in, so I couldn't drive to town." She went to the cookstove. "I'll fix us cocoa. I was lucky there was food here. I was in such a panic,

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I didn't think to stop off and buy any on my way. All I wanted was to hide." She fetched cold water in a dishpan. "How did you find me?"

"When I had time to think—" I put my feet into the water "—I knew you could only be here."

"It was brave of you to come," she said.

"I was lonely." I rubbed my feet. "I needed you."

"I was lonely, too," she said.

And then there was a sharp, hard knock on the door, and the door opened, and there stood T. Hodges in her deputy sheriff's uniform. It had begun to snow, so there was snow on her shoulders and the brim of her hat. She looked frozen. While we stared, she came inside. A uniformed muscleman followed her and shut the door. He showed us a Fresno County sheriff's badge, and said:

"Arlene Dexter, you are under arrest for the murder of Samuel Dexter in Madrone, California, in San Luis Obispo County, on the seventeenth of February."

Arlene shook her head. "I didn't," she said.

"She didn't," I said.

Muscles said, "You have the right to remain silent; if you give up that right, anything you say . . . "

He droned on with it until the end. I'd heard it dozens of times on TV cop shows. It sounded different now.

I asked T. Hodges, "Who told you about this place? Miss Touhy? Cap Willard?"

"Nobody had to tell me." T. Hodges gave me the corner of a smile. "All I had to do was follow you."

Arlene wouldn't let Carlotta pay for a lawyer. So, after she'd spent days in jail—no bail because she'd run away once already—it was Fred May, a fat public defender in worn-out tennis shoes, a faded red sweatshirt, and jeans that kept slipping down below his belly, who went before a judge with her. I couldn't make up my mind which of them, poor, battered Arlene or Fat Freddy, with his mangy hair ponytailed with a rubber band, looked the worst. Who'd believe either of them? But Fat Freddy did a good job because the judge ruled there was insufficient evidence to hold Arlene for Sam's murder, and made the sheriff release her. We felt good, we felt empty, we felt very tired, and we drove in Carlotta's car not those long miles up the canyon to the apple ranch, but to the house on Old Bridge Road. The first thing Carlotta did when we got there was drop her bag on the kitchen table and

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walk through the house and close the door to the den where Sam had worked and where he'd died. In the kitchen together we ate something Carlotta took out of the freezer and heated—I don't think any of us knew what it was or cared—then we went to bed. To be back in my own bed felt wonderful, but really it could have been stuffed with rocks and I'd have gone to sleep anyway. I was dog-tired. For nights I'd lain awake worrying about Arlene locked up in a cell and maybe going to be locked up forever. Tonight I didn't have to worry about anything any more. It felt great.

Nobody thought I should go back to school the next day. I didn't like the idea of missing more classes and homework assignments than I already had. But I didn't want to face the sneers of the kids and teachers either, or the questions my friends would ask, not meaning any harm but ready to get sore if I didn't explain. I didn't want to lose any friends, but I didn't want to explain either. Why should I? So I just stayed home.

After breakfast, Carlotta drove Arlene over to see old Dr. Belle Hesseltine, about her face. They'd taken photographs of her bruises at the jail, but the doctoring hadn't amounted to much. I was in my room, working on a drawing of Cluff Meadows in the snow. With me walking through the trees toward the cabin, and Arlene standing in the cabin door shielding her eyes the way she had. Like in Chinese art, I made the figures small, the trees and mountains tall, and tried to catch the snowy emptiness. After I got it sketched in pencil, I took out my bamboo pen. I really like it. And I'd just opened the India ink when the door chime went.

It was Lieutenant Gerard. My heart sank. Because with him was Garland. In handcuffs. I'd thought my worries were over. I'd forgotten if the law couldn't have Arlene for killing Sam, it would have to have somebody else. "What?" I said.

"May we come in?" Gerard said.

"Garland," I said.

"I'm sorry about this," he said. "How are you?"

"You didn't kill him," I said.

"You know that," Garland said with a wan smile, "and I know that. Unluckily, the lieutenant has his doubts."

I was still standing in the doorway. I told Gerard, "He hasn't been in Settlers Cove in years." I gave Garland the most reproachful look I could work up. "I kept phoning him in San Francisco, begging him to

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come. He never would."

"He did." Gerard backed me out of his way and came inside, a big revolver holstered on his thigh. Garland came in, too, and Gerard shut the door. "He came the day Sam Dexter died. He met you on your bike in the road. The two of you nearly collided."

I said, "I don't remember."

"You remember when you went to Cap's Pier just after you discovered Sam Dexter's dead body—" he jerked his head to indicate the den "—on the floor in there. You didn't tell Cap about that, but you told him you'd seen your father."

"I didn't," I said. "I was pissed off about my boat, that's all. Cap had promised me the *Argo* when I grew up. I couldn't see why he'd let Sam go out drunk and sink her in the storm."

Lost in thought, Garland stood looking around the room, taking it all in, probably remembering old times when we all lived here together. I hoped some of the memories were happy. I hoped some of them had me in them. Then without looking at me, sort of absentmindedly, he said, "Cap can get you another boat. With the insurance money."

I stared. "But he said—" I didn't finish.

"You saw your father driving away from here in a panic," Gerard said. "And you figured if he was in the area, he would have gone to see Cap, too. You were afraid your father had shot Sam Dexter, and you went to ask Cap not to tell anyone he'd seen Garland Moore that day." He smiled wryly. "Especially not me."

I shook my head. "I didn't see him."

"The rubber from the skidmarks down the trail—" Gerard gestured at the window "—came from the tires on your father's gold Mercedes." He took a padlock from his pocket. "This is yours. It has your initials on it. We found it where you fell off your bike."

Garland started to reach out to me, I guess to touch my hair or to pat my shoulder, but both hands had to come at the same time on account of the handcuffs, and he drew them back. Still, the old gentleness was in his voice. "It's no use, son," he said. "I was here. I've admitted it. And you did see me. You may as well say so."

"You didn't kill Sam," I said.

"He was dead when I got here," Garland said. He glanced shamefaced at Gerard and looked away again. "I ought to have called the sheriff. But all I could think was Arlene had killed him. I still love

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her, you know, Jason. With all my heart. There'll never be anyone else for me." Tears were in his eyes. "That's why I don't come see you. It hurts too much." His face set, and he gave his head a quick shake. "I wasn't going to set the law on Arlene."

I turned on Gerard. "Where's the gun? If he killed Sam, where's the gun?"

"We'll find it," Gerard said. "All we need is time."

An hour later, at Carlotta's, I knelt in the orchard. In the dark and rain, I'd done a very poor job of concealment. Fallen apple tree leaves, blackened by the damp, lay thick on the ground everywhere except for where I'd buried the gun. In daylight like this, anyone could have found it. My heart thumped. What if they had? Maybe the gun wasn't there any more. I dug with Carlotta's trowel. It clanked, and I felt better. The gun was still there. I unwrapped it. The plastic had kept it dry. I hadn't even looked before. Now I checked. There were cartridges in the cylinder. Four of them. I stuffed the gun in at my waist and rode my bike back down the canyon. Coasting, mostly. I was grateful for that. My legs were tired.

* * *

If I hadn't been so angry, they probably wouldn't have taken me all the way to Cap's Pier. I dropped my bike on the planks, ran to the bait shack, burst into the gloomy, tackle-hung room. Cap sat crosslegged on the floor, a sail spread out around him, mending a rip with a huge, curved needle. He looked up sharply. "What are you doing here?" he said.

"Insurance," I said. "The next morning, after Sam lost the *Argo,* you called the insurance company, and they told you the insurance policy had expired. Isn't that right?"

Cap pushed the sail away and got stiffly to his feet. He wasn't looking at my face. His gaze was fixed on my waistband. "That's my gun. Where the hell did you get that?"

I took the gun out, pulled back the hammer, and pointed it at him. Very wobbly. My hand was shaking. "Answer me about the insurance."

"What do you know about insurance?" he snorted.

"I know you let Sam handle all your business stuff," I said. "He told me so. And you always said you hated bookkeeping, banking, bill-paying. You used to groan over it."

"Put the gun down, Jason," he said. "Somebody's going to get hurt."

"You put it all in Sam's

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hands, let him look after everything," I said. "Including the insurance policies—right?"

He said, "You're in over your head here, boy," and took a step toward me, reaching out. "Give me the gun, now."

"After you tell me the truth," I said. I was trying to sound tough, but I sounded like I was about to cry. "You murdered him because he was cheating you."

"He let me think he'd paid the insurance," Cap said. "But instead he'd written the checks to himself." He picked up papers from the desk. "I made him show me his bank statements. Here they are." He rattled them at me. He was angry now, remembering. His face got red. "He'd embezzled half the money I owed. No wonder I was failing here. He was sinking me deeper and deeper in debt."

"And when you found out," I said, "you killed him."

Cap nodded. "I sure as hell did." Then he gave me a funny kind of gasp. His knees sagged. He dropped the papers, clutched his chest, leaned back against the desk. "Dead as mackerel." His eyes were angry, glaring at me. "And don't tell me you aren't glad. After what he did to you, sinking the *Argo*. Your boat, the boat I gave you. I'm your friend, Jason, aren't you forgetting? You should be thanking me, not waving a gun at me."

"What kind of friend?" I scoffed. "You promised not to tell anyone Garland had been here. You broke your promise. To save your own neck, you tried to put the blame on Garland. Don't ask me to thank you, Cap."

"Sam Dexter—stole—my life." Cap dropped to his knees. Heavily. Staring at me, begging with his eyes. For what? For me to say I forgave him? I guess I did, but I couldn't say it. He fell face forward on the floor. The weight of him made the old pier shake.

"All right, Jason," a voice said behind me. I turned. It was T. Hodges again. She put her hand out, too. Exactly as Cap had done. Only for her, I handed over the gun.

"What are you going to do with your time," I said, "when you don't have to follow me around any more?"

But she didn't answer. She was kneeling beside Cap to see if he was alive.

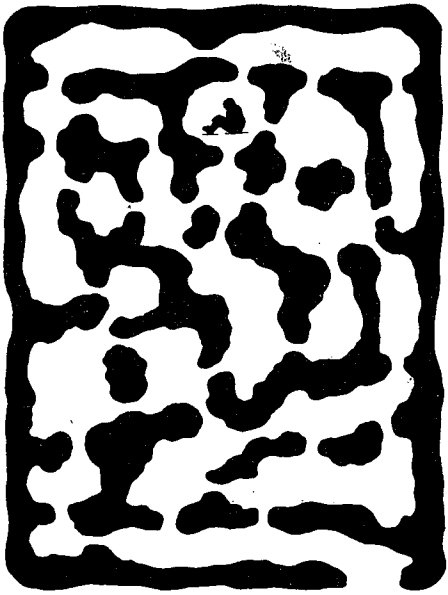
I hoped for his own sake he wasn't.

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UNSOLVED
by
Walter Shepherd

Unsolved at present, that is, but can you work it out?

The answer will appear in the December issue.



Karl's bad—there's no question of it, for he once trapped Patrolman Footsore, tied him up, and threw him into the set of caves now called Carlsbad Caverns to commemorate the incident. Patrolman Footsore eventually got free of his bonds and set himself to find a way out, being careful to leave notches on the wall as he went so that he should never cross or retrace his path.

It so happens that in escaping he went through nearly all the 38 "doorways" between the caves, yet he never passed through the same one twice. Had he gone through *all* the doorways he could not have escaped at all. What is the largest number of doorways he could have passed through, just once each, and yet still escaped?

Note: *"Doorways" means, of course, the narrow gaps between the caves. The puzzle may be solved by trial and error, or by a simple mathematical inspection.*

See page 134 for the solution to the October puzzle.

"Bad Karl's Cavern," from BIG BOOK OF MAZES & LABYRINTHS *by Walter Shepherd, © 1973 by Walter Shepherd, originally published by Dover Publications, Inc. Used by permission of Rupert Crew Ltd. (London).*

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FICTION

Bride of Mister Hand

by Steven Nelson



Illustration by Richard Sauer

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Casper Nesbit's decision to buy a pet tarantula was based on two events: the disappearance of his girlfriend Geneva Angelina, and his discovery of a novel called *Bride of Mister Hand.* Geneva Angelina had left Casper quite unexpectedly, leaving behind a note on tearstained paper informing Casper that she was moving to the big city to pursue a career as a laundromat attendant, and asking him to try to forget her forever. Casper was perfectly willing to forget about his former girlfriend. In fact, he had never considered her very memorable. But her departure had left a void in his life that he was having a hard time trying to fill. Geneva had been gone three months already and still Casper had not found a replacement for her. And so he decided to buy a pet, something to comfort him in his loneliness. A dog would have been nice, but Casper lived in a hotel where no pets of any sort were allowed. Which meant that he would have to pick something small and quiet that the hotel management would never find out about. A snake was his first choice, but after he read *Bride of Mister Hand,* no other pet but a tarantula would do.

Casper had a nice quiet job in a tobacco and magazine store. During the slow parts of the day he amused himself by sampling the different brands of chewing tobacco, spitting the juice into a box of kitty litter he kept on the floor behind the counter, and by reading novels whose lurid covers attracted his attention. The cover of *Bride of Mister Hand* featured a picture of a young woman with long blonde hair and black underwear, sitting on her bed while she applied polish to her toenails. In the background a giant hairy spider could be seen climbing over the sill of the open window.

The blurb on the back cover promised sensational reading, and offered a summary of the plot. *"Bride of Mister Hand,"* the blurb said, "is the story of a severed hand that comes to life in a city morgue, escapes through the air-conditioning vents, and grows into a giant spiderlike creature that roams the streets at night, kidnapping beautiful girls and strangling the ones who refuse to become his willing sex-slaves." Nesbit flipped through the pages and came across a passage that looked interesting. " '. . . Too faint with fear to cry out,' " Nesbit read softly to himself, " 'the maiden struggled to free herself from the giant spider's web of death. Her pudgy, buoyant breasts, a delicate pink in color, strained and heaved against the frail fabric of her dotted swiss silk chemise.

" 'As Mr. Hand approached her, leaving his vile trail of slime,

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the girl tossed her lovely locks—she had hair like gilded wood shavings—and raked Mr. Hand from head to sinister toe with her scornful gaze. "Stop slavering, you brute," she said in a voice icy with contempt. "Vermin!" she cried as the spider groped at her with one hirsute, scaly leg.

" 'Mr. Hand laughed, low and smooth, as only a giant spider can laugh. He thrust aside the folds of his voluminous crepe cape and drew from his vest pocket the engagement ring with the diamond the size of a mothball he always offered to his prospective brides.

" 'The girl opened wide her gold-flecked lavender eyes which flashed with the deep fire of fresh Australian opals. "Never, you roach!" she gasped, her voice rising to a taut pitch of fevered fear, uncontrollable disgust, and something like veiled pity.' "

Casper Nesbit was interrupted in his reading at this point by the appearance of a customer. The man bought a handful of foot-long cigars and glanced at the cover of the book. "Damn tarantulas," the man said. "My sister used to raise them things. Made me sick. I said, 'Bess, honey, why can't you raise chinchillas like respectable folks?' But she just went on breeding spiders." He shivered. "Sold them. Imagine somebody buying a thing like that?"

Casper visited three pet shops before he found a tarantula to his liking. He bought a cracked fish tank as well, put an inch or two of kitty litter in it, and set Mr. Hand and his new home on a chair near the window in his hotel room. But Casper felt that something was missing. He took the bus downtown and spent an hour in Woolworth's picking out a blonde-headed Barbie doll and an accessory package of pink lingerie. He told the clerk the doll was for his kid sister. He told her three times, but she didn't care. She wouldn't have shown any more interest if Casper had told her the truth.

He returned to his hotel room, dressed Barbie in her new outfit, tied her hands and feet with postal twine, and set her upright in a corner of Mr. Hand's terrarium. Mr. Hand seemed pleased.

Casper's one window faced across a narrow courtyard on the other side of which was another wing of the same hotel. His window was on the second floor. In the evenings he liked to examine the second story windows across the way with a small telescope he had owned since his Boy Scout days. About two weeks after his purchase of Mr. Hand, Casper noticed that a woman had moved into the hotel room opposite his who bore a vague but disturbing resemblance to the blonde underwear-clad nail-polisher on the cover of *Bride of Mister Hand.* This new neighbor came home late at night

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and always spent an hour or two walking up and down in front of her window, in her underwear, reading from a book and gesturing with her hands a lot. Casper decided she must be an actress. He watched her every night for a week before making his decision.

"I want a spider costume," Casper told the clerk in the costume and clown supply store downtown. "Not a Spiderman costume, just a spider costume."

The clerk knitted her brows. "I'm sorry, there's so little call for those. I don't think we have a thing," she said despairingly. Then her face brightened. "I know, I've just thought of something. We've got an old crayfish costume in the back room. I'd be willing to alter it, for a price. It'll have to be dyed black, and I'm not sure what we'll do about the legs. I'll think of something. How soon do you need it?"

"Soon!" said Casper. "Never mind the expense. I need it *now*, tonight if possible."

Casper had to wait two days for the costume. He rushed home with it and tried it on. It did not quite meet his expectations, but it wasn't an entirely bad likeness. He improved it by adding a black cape made from a plastic garbage bag, a Lone Ranger's mask, and a T-shirt on which he had carefully printed the words "The Sinister Mr. Hand."

It was close to midnight when The Sinister Mr. Hand crept across the dark and deserted courtyard toward the dwelling of his chosen bride. A length of rain gutter pipe rose conveniently near the lighted window that was the spider's goal. He slithered up it, dislodging a frightened moth in his progress. As he watched the moth flutter fearfully into the night, Casper laughed, low and smooth, as only a giant spider can laugh.

When he drew level with the window, he reached out and grasped the sill with his gloved hands while he let go of the pipe with his legs. For a dangerous moment he dangled helplessly, then began to inch his way through the partly opened window. It was hard work, requiring concentration, and that's why he didn't notice his chosen bride approaching him with a rolled up newspaper.

"Insect!" she screeched, swatting at Casper repeatedly until he began to lose his hold. He looked up just in time to see the window slamming down on him, like the blade of an extremely dull guillotine. He slipped backwards and let go of the sill, but the closing window managed to trap one of his extra legs and he found himself hanging helplessly two stories above the courtyard.

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The woman was not through with him. She opened an adjoining window and sprayed a can of Raid on Casper's head until the can hissed empty. Then in a surprisingly calm voice she said, "If you make a habit of this, I'll be forced to complain. What kind of town is this, anyway? Scoot, junior. Scuttle on home." She slammed down the window, pulled the shade, then pulled the shade on the first window as well. Casper was left in the dark, his spider leg still trapped by the window.

It was a chastened bug that limped back to its lair that night. Soaked with insecticide, bruised by multiple swats, and minus a spider leg that had to be chewed off and left clamped in the bride's window. The first thing Casper did when he got back to his room, after casting a reproachful glance at his pet tarantula, was to close his window and jerk down the heavy blind. Then he carefully patched a tiny hole in the blind with a Band-Aid.

The next day he disposed of the spider costume and the Barbie doll in the local dumpster. Then he took Mr. Hand back to the pet shop and traded him off for a small, quiet box turtle. He named it Alexander.

For the next month Casper Nesbit read the least stimulating, most innocuous literature he could find in the shop he worked in. *Dentistry's Horizons* and *Cork Mills in Perspective* became his favorite magazines. He was glad to have a quiet companion like Alexander to go home to. But he was afraid that his new pet was growing bored, and so he determined to buy the turtle a toy. In Woolworth's he found a tiny, fluffy brown teddy bear. "It's for my turtle," he told the clerk, who nodded, put his purchase in a sack, and gave him the correct change.

Alexander liked his teddy and spent a good deal of his time nuzzling the soft toy fondly with his nose. Casper was pleased, but there came a day when he realized that turtles must have sunlight. Casper had not opened his window, or even touched the shade, since his midnight encounter with the blonde swatter across the way. Early one evening Casper decided that he *must* give Alexander light. The turtle was definitely off his feed. Casper slowly raised the blind, and the last rays of that evening's sun came into his room uninvited. He glanced across the courtyard at the windows opposite.

Even without a telescope he could see that the blonde had been replaced by a brunette. She was a short, rounded little woman, with an abundance of fluffy hair. Casper snatched at the telescope

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he'd been keeping under the bed and trained it on his neighbor. She was working on a row of potted plants that were ranged on her windowsill. Most of them appeared to be varieties of cactus, but there was one leafy monster which the woman was clipping at with large shiny pruning shears. Casper noticed what the woman was wearing. It was a brown satin undergarment that Casper recognized—from his former habit of perusing the lingerie advertisements in the backs of magazines—as a style known as a "teddy."

Casper turned away from the window, glanced fiercely at Alexander and his teddy bear in their terrarium, and turned back to the window. The sun would soon be going down. His mind began to work with a remarkable swiftness. He spoke a few low words to himself. "Alexander Turtle the Great," he said, and then a little louder, "Bride of Alexander Turtle the Great."

Casper thought that if he strapped a flattened garbage can lid to his back and rubbed down his body with something green, like spinach or lime Jell-O, he'd make a passable turtle. He shrugged. It would just have to do. It was the best he could do on such short notice.

(continued from page 4)

shots, providing the light and dark contrasts are clear enough for converting to an effective black and white picture (the photocopy you make will be a good indication).

And if you're not a photographer, keep an eye out for other people's photos—in newspapers, for example. If we also like what you turn up, we might be able to get permission to reprint it (any information you can give us about it—the photographer's name if possible, and where and when it was printed—will be important).

And yes, we do pay for original photographs.

Finally, if you are new to AHMM, send us a stamped, self-addressed business envelope for our Mysterious Photograph guidelines. They include examples of past photographs and the stories they have inspired.

We'll be hanging around the mailbox.

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FICTION

Cardboard Coffins

by Pete Hautman

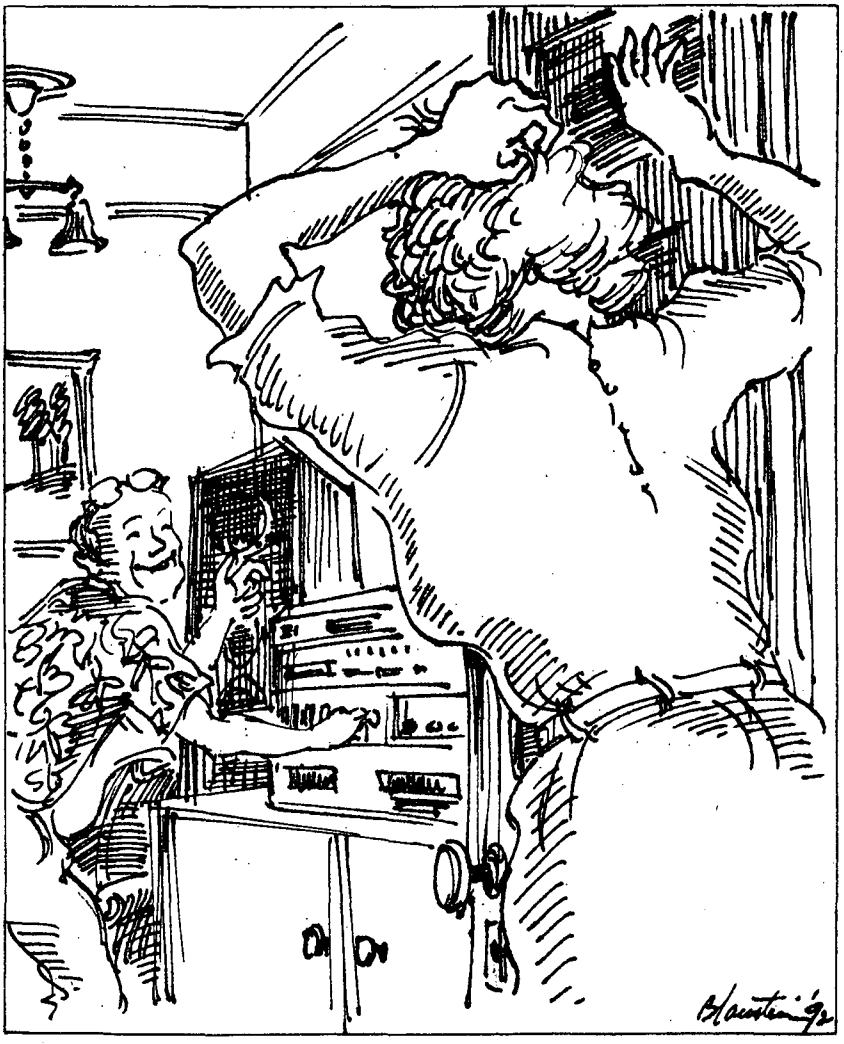


Illustration by Hank Blaustein

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Elwood Oftedahl, whistling cheerfully to himself, inserted the last gold-plated speaker wire connector into the gold-plated receptacle on the back of one of his brand new Decimax Black Tower speakers. He twisted the connector into place, jiggled it to make sure it was set in properly, then pushed the five and one-half foot tall, ninety-three pound speaker back into the corner of the room as recommended by the salesman at Audioland. Intent on his task, he did not notice when his wife came through the front door.

Just home from her job at the supermarket, Alice Oftedahl watched her husband skid the black obelisk across the carpet. There was little apparent expression in her bland features, although a practiced observer such as Elwood, had he been watching, might have said that her eyes, nose, and mouth all got a tad closer together. She stood quietly in the doorway watching as Elwood positioned the speaker just so, pointing it, like its twin in the opposite corner, directly toward the sonic center of the small living room. Where were her corner hutches? She waited for him to notice her, which, a moment later, he did.

"Hi, honey," he said with a grin. "How was work?"

Alice moved her mouth up a quarter of an inch closer to her nose and jerked her head from side to side.

Elwood, a compact and cheerful man with the beginnings of a bald spot shining through his curly blond hair, smiled uncertainly. Alice had been a little on the tense side lately. He would have to do something to cheer her up.

"You won't believe the great deal I found on these," he said, gesturing at the new speakers. Alice liked bargains; she was the most frugal person he had ever known.

But Alice was not impressed. There were any number of things that she might have said at this juncture, including but limited to:

"Are you out of your mind?"

"And who do you think is going to pay for them, Mister Hasn't-Worked-in-Five-Months?"

"What are those ugly things doing in my living room?"

"What have you done with my teak corner hutches?"

And, *"I don't care how good a deal you got, those monstrosities are going back to the store this minute!"*

But Alice said none of those things, for she did not think that she could bear to listen to her husband's response.

What she said, in her

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pinched voice, was, "Elwood, one of these days I'm going to kill you."

At the time, she did not think that she meant it.

Alice went straight to the bedroom and threw herself down on the water bed. She was not an excitable or unreasonable woman—she thought of herself as a still pool of reason in a world filled with Elwoods. She lay on the bed and tried to calm herself as eighty-seven gallons of water, trapped in its plastic sleeve, sloshed beneath her. It has only been five months, she thought, gritting her teeth. Five months of him being home all the time, always underfoot and spending what little money she was able to earn at the Super Valu. What is five months out of a lifetime? An eternity.

She crossed her arms over her breasts and squeezed, trying to excise the memory of the six hundred dollar aluminum wheels he had bought for his pickup truck. His gas-guzzling, money-sucking four by four. Love of his miserable life. Alice gave her head a shake, sending the water bed into a complicated series of convolutions. Elwood's water bed, another brilliant acquisition.

Men. That was it. All men were fools.

Usually, however, they were employed fools.

She forced herself to consider happier days. Even now he sometimes brought her flowers.

Charged them on their Visa.

Alice took a deep breath. She let the breath out slowly, then breathed in again. Ride it out, she thought. She let the air trickle from her lungs. Five minutes later, when she had finally hypnotized herself into something resembling contentment, the walls began to roar. Alice clapped her hands over her ears and rolled off the bed. The house was shaking, she could feel the vibrations clawing up through the soles of her feet. She staggered to the bedroom door and threw it open. Elwood was standing in the middle of the living room, his mouth open, his eyes joyful. Alice could feel the bass from the tremendous speakers jiggling her abdomen. She charged across the room and hit every button she could find on the stereo system until the sound abruptly ceased. She looked at her husband, her small eyes protruding visibly.

"Aren't they great?" Elwood said, his face suffused with that special light that comes only to men who have just fired up a brand new machine.

Alice's ears were still ringing. She bit her lip, holding it

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between her teeth, trying not to bite all the way through. A cold glass of water might help. She ordered her body to go to the kitchen. It was there that she found the antique corner hutches that the Decimax speakers had replaced. The teak corner hutches that had come over the ocean from Sweden with her grandmother were now loitering in the tiny kitchen like vagrants in a holding tank, her china and glass knickknacks jumbled on the shelves. Numbly, she opened one of the hutches and began to rearrange her collection of miniature porcelain elephants.

She heard Elwood say, from the other room, "Honey, you got to listen to this. One of your favorites. Joni Mitchell."

A crackle, a buzz, and the house began to shake. The elephants began to dance on the shelf. As she watched in horror, a pink elephant skittered to the edge of the shelf, fell, and shattered on the linoleum tile floor.

Alice felt the rage explode in her chest; she grabbed the first portable object she saw, rushed back into the living room, and brought it down on the stereo receiver. The noise changed character, the roar that had been Joni Mitchell's overamped voice became a staccato shrieking. She struck again, and the shrieking devolved into a low, snapping buzz. Elwood's voice came from over her shoulder, "Hey, Alice, take it easy, honey . . . " She felt his hand touch her shoulder, turned, and struck him several times on the head, on the arms, on the shoulders, beating him down. The speakers gave a final crackle and fizz, then fell silent.

Her breathing coming in stertorous gasps, she looked down at her prone husband, then at the object in her hands, recognizing it for the first time as the unbreakable Bonzai Knife with the blade that never needs sharpening. Elwood had ordered it from an ad on the TV. She looked at the stereo, at the several gashes and holes punched through the black metal cabinet. My goodness, she thought. It really does cut through metal like butter.

For the first time since the day they had married, Alice Oftedahl was glad that Elwood was a little guy. Even so, it was a major effort to pack him into the speaker box. Once in, however, he fit perfectly. Keeping her back straight as she had learned from her chiropractor, Alice lifted the box to an upright position. She could hear Elwood's body settle down inside. She strapped the box onto the dolly she had rented from

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the neighborhood U-Haul and wheeled it out to the garage where, after several minutes of grunting, huffing, and groaning, she managed to get it tucked into the back of her Plymouth station wagon. That done, Alice went back into the house and celebrated by making herself a peanut butter and pickle sandwich.

Her idea was simple but, she hoped, effective. She would drive out into the country until she found a secluded wooded area, dig a hole as deep as she could manage, insert the body, go home, take a nap. Fortunately it was Saturday, so she wouldn't have to miss any work. Tomorrow she could return the speakers to Audioland. Alice smiled and finished her sandwich. Life without Elwood would make everything so much simpler.

Gardening gloves, old jeans, sun visor, insect repellent, body . . . all she was missing was a good digging shovel. Alice shrugged, started the car, and backed out of the driveway. She could stop at the K-mart and get a shovel. A cheap one, since she would probably only need it this one time.

Duncan Skoro made his living by grasping opportunities and running with them. He remained alert at all times for situations that presented an attractive balance of risk and reward. He was bold, purposeful, resourceful, and, he liked to think, professional.

Duncan Skoro was a sneak thief, and a good one. He had never been caught except that once, and he had gotten off on a technicality. Of course, the times he got cracked as a juvenile didn't count. That was all a part of his education. And if you didn't count the times he had been held over for questioning or thrown in detox after celebrating a score, he had never done time in jail. Duncan was twenty-two years old and already something of a success.

Like many of his peers, Duncan Skoro measured his success in terms of the number and value of objects he owned. The Rolex watch he had lifted from an open locker at the Sports and Health Club. His Toyota van, which he had actually paid for with cash money. His Nakamichi stereo system.

He was in his Toyota van, stopping at the K-mart to buy some new CD's for the Sony CD player he had recently liberated, when he spotted the Decimax speaker box in the back of a Plymouth station wagon. Duncan stopped his van and took a closer look. It was a Decimax Black Tower, "the most

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powerful speaker available without a prescription," as reviewed in *Audiomaster* magazine. Seventeen ninety-nine each at retail; he had always wanted a pair for his apartment. Duncan Skoro knew his sound systems; it was part of his job.

He climbed out of the van, looked around the parking lot, then, relaxed and casual, tried the latch on the station wagon. Had the tailgate been locked, Duncan would have shrugged and driven away. He did not do breaking and entering; he was a sneak thief. He sought out opportunities but did not go so far as to create them. As it happened, the tailgate was unlocked. The speaker was heavier than he would have thought, but the usual surge of adrenaline helped, and within sixty seconds Duncan had the box in his van and was rolling out of the parking lot. He could pick up the CD's some other time.

Alice stood in the parking lot holding her new shovel, staring at the open tailgate of her station wagon, looking like one half of a modern day *American Gothic*.

When she had completely absorbed the fact that Elwood was gone, she walked back into the K-mart to return the shovel. As she stood in line at the customer service kiosk, Alice considered her situation. Someone had stolen Elwood, mistaking him for a speaker. She did not mind that so much, since it would save her a lot of digging, but what would they do when they found out what they had? It was too much to expect the thief to go forward with her program and bury Elwood. More likely, they would dump him by the side of the road someplace, he would be found, and the police would come knocking at her door with the sad news. It might be a problem. Would they blame her for his death? Probably. They would find the bloodstains on the living room carpet. Even if she cleaned it, they would find microscopic bits of Elwood's blood with their scientific tests. And they would wonder why she had not reported him missing. It could be a real problem.

And how was she going to return both speakers to Audioland with only one box? That would take some fast talking.

"Number ninety-seven!" a voice called.

"Right here," said Alice, waving the shovel and her receipt.

A disappointed Duncan Skoro sat on the floor of his apartment looking into the open end of the Decimax box.

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This was not a Decimax Black Tower. It was a dead man with dried blood on the beginnings of a bald spot. Duncan scratched his nose and considered his options, an interesting exercise since he had never before boosted a corpse. After some thought, he pulled the dead man out of the box and, breathing shallowly, went through the pockets. Opportunities came in strange guises, and Duncan was determined not to let any of them slide. He found a wallet; the wallet contained six dollars and several pieces of identification, each showing an address on Cherry Street. Duncan pushed Elwood back into his box and put an old Aretha Franklin album on his turntable. Thinking music. He listened to Aretha's big voice being strained through his crummy little Panasonic speakers, stolen over five years ago and hardly worth the effort, and considered the probable circumstances of Elwood Oftedahl's untimely demise.

Later that same night he drove his van slowly past 4218 Cherry Street and parked at the end of the block. He walked past the house, a small cottagelike house in a quiet urban neighborhood. It was after midnight, but the lights were still on. He walked around the block. A dog started barking, which set off several other dogs. None of the barking, however, was coming from the Oftedahl residence. Duncan returned to his van, smoked a cigarette, walked back down to 4218, and turned up the walk. He stood on the front steps and pretended to push the bell while taking a careful look at the neighbors' windows. When he was fairly sure that he was not being observed, he stepped off onto the lawn and looked past the edge of the curtain into Elwood Oftedahl's living room. There they were, standing like two great sentinels at the corners of the room; the Decimax Black Towers.

He shifted his gaze to the floor, where a huge square of carpeting had been crudely cut away. Duncan stepped away from the window and circled around to the side of the house. He could see under the miniblinds into a kitchen. A woman was standing at the sink scrubbing a knife. He watched her for five minutes. She would squirt soap on the knife, scrub it with a dish mop, rinse it, scrub it again. On the floor beside her was a large, overstuffed, green plastic garbage bag. He could see a piece of carpeting sticking out.

Things were falling into place.

* * *

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The next morning, Alice answered the ringing telephone.

"Is this Mrs. Oftedahl?" a voice asked.

"I don't want any," Alice replied.

"I have your husband," the voice said.

"You can keep him." She hung up. Now that she had cleaned the knife and thrown the bloody carpeting in a dumpster behind a Domino's Pizza on Lake Street, there was nothing to connect her with Elwood's death. In theory.

The telephone rang again; she lifted the receiver and held it a few inches away from her ear.

"I know you killed your husband, lady, now do you want to talk or should I call the cops?"

"I don't know what you're talking about," said Alice.

"I can call the cops, tell them where to find the body, tell them I saw it in the back of your car. I can even tell them where to find the carpet you threw away last night. Are you listening to me?"

Alice thought her heart was going to explode, the way it was banging around in there. Everything was going wrong. She had done everything right, the best way she knew how, and now everything was getting confused again.

"You took Elwood," she said, her voice cracking.

"I have him," said the voice.

"What do you want?" she asked.

"I want the speakers."

"The what?" Alice was confused.

"The Decimax Towers. You give me the speakers and you can have your husband back."

"I don't want him back."

"You want me to just dump him off someplace?"

Alice paused. "No."

"Make up your mind, lady."

"Just a minute," Alice said. Now what was she supposed to do? Her mind spun freely for a few moments, then something clicked. There were two speaker cartons. One of them contained Elwood, who had made her life hell for so long. Perhaps the other carton could be put to similar use. The corners of her mouth turned up slightly. The symmetry of it appealed to her.

"Okay," she said. "You can bring him over right now. I'll be waiting for you."

"Uh-uh, no way, lady. I'll tell you what to do with your speakers, then you can have your Elwood. Here's how we're going to work this, you and me . . . "

Bold, ingenious, resourceful, imaginative, courageous . . . Duncan Skoro considered himself

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all of those things and more. He was also a reasonable fellow, never asking for too much from anyone. Some guys would have held Mrs. Oftedahl up for more than a set of speakers, but Duncan was not greedy. He felt that he was owed the speakers, especially after getting such a nasty shock when he had opened the box to discover a dead man inside.

At seven o'clock that evening, while it was still light out, but not too light, he parked his van beside a warehouse just off Washington Avenue, hung a pair of binoculars around his neck, and walked down the alley to the base of an old iron fire escape. By stacking up a few discarded wooden pallets, Duncan was able to climb up onto the fire escape and ascend to the top of the four story building.

He found that the station wagon was parked on the opposite side of the building, between the warehouse and the back wall of a mattress company, right where he had told the woman to leave it. He leaned out over the parapet and looked down at it through the binoculars. He could see the speakers in the back of the car, one in its carton and the other unwrapped. So far so good. Duncan swept the binoculars methodically up and down the streets and alleys. You never knew what a woman would do, and in this business, the business of exploiting opportunities, it paid to be careful. Bold, but careful. He would watch the area for a while; then, if everything looked clear, he would climb down and walk past the car a few times. Then he would lean against the fender and smoke a cigarette, not doing anything yet, still checking things out. If it still looked good, he would walk to his van, drive it around the building, load the speakers into the van, and leave Elwood, who was getting pretty ripe, in the car. A good deal for everybody, he thought. Except Elwood, of course, but he wasn't complaining.

Duncan Skoro was contentedly rehashing his plan, appreciating its brilliance, when the whole thing began to fall apart before his eyes. A man wearing a raincoat and a faded baseball cap pulled low over his face came strolling down the alley.

Very suspicious, Duncan thought, focusing the binoculars. Why would anyone wear a raincoat on a warm, clear summer day? Maybe it was a cop. He couldn't see the face. He couldn't tell for sure, now that he thought about it, whether it was a man or a woman. It could

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be the dead guy's wife.

The man, if it was a man, was walking past the station wagon and had almost left it behind when he stopped and, with the jaded hope of an indigent checking a pay phone for change, peered into the back of the wagon.

The effect the speakers had on him was galvanic; Duncan could almost see his ears perk up. He straightened, looked up and down the alley, then pressed his face to the back window of the station wagon for a closer look at the speakers. Within seconds he had opened the tailgate and was pulling the boxed speaker out of the car.

From the rooftop Duncan shouted, "Hey you! Stop!"

The man looked up, saw Duncan, and redoubled his efforts. He let the speaker box drop to the ground, grabbed the end of the box, and started dragging it backwards down the alley. Duncan dropped the binoculars, raced across the roof to the fire escape, and clattered down the rusted steps, reaching the alley at a velocity only slightly less than if he had jumped. He dashed around the building, all caution forgotten now, intent on preventing the theft of his all-but-acquired property. By the time he reached the station wagon the determined thief had dragged the weighty speaker all the way to the end of the alley. Duncan ran at him, shouting. The figure hesitated, then dropped the speaker at the last possible moment and took off running. Duncan, gasping for breath, watched him disappear at the corner. When he had recovered somewhat, he lifted the boxed speaker to an upright position and considered how to get it back to the car.

Wait, he thought. I don't have to move it, I can bring the van around here.

He trotted off around the building to where he had left his Toyota van, checking the station wagon on the way to make sure the other speaker was still in place.

From her hiding place, Alice Oftedahl watched and awaited her next opportunity. Things had happened too quickly, she had panicked and done nothing. Next time would be different. The thief would return, and this time she would be ready for him. One thing she was happy to see: he was a little guy, smaller than Elwood.

In the half hour or so since Duncan Skoro had parked the van, Elwood smelled as if he had decomposed significantly. Duncan had to open both doors

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and run the fan for a while before he could stand to get inside. He hoped that when he died they would not let him stink up people's lives this way. When he could no longer stand the thought of the wino returning for another try at his speaker, he hopped in and, breathing shallowly through his mouth, drove back around the building to where the speaker was waiting in the middle of the alley. Unable to get past the speaker, he stopped and got out to pull it around to the back of the van. He hugged the speaker and was dragging it backward when he noticed a crude rectangular hole cut in the carton, right in front of his face. Peering into the hole, he saw a set of eyes blink once.

Something hit him in the chest.

Duncan let go of the box and tried to step back. Something was holding him, sticking to his chest. He jerked away and felt a searing hot sensation behind his ribcage. The front of his shirt was suddenly soaked; warm blood was trickling past his navel. Duncan backed away from the box, staring uncomprehending at the bloody ten inch serrated blade that projected from the cardboard. The blade withdrew into the carton, leaving behind a rivulet of thick red blood, then emerged again somewhat lower. Duncan could feel the strength leaving his body. He staggered back until he hit the warehouse, then slid down the brick wall, watching as the blade sawed up through the cardboard, splitting the box vertically. The two halves of the box separated and Alice Oftedahl looked out, blinking, holding the Bonzai Knife, watching Duncan Skoro's life flow away.

She would never be able to return the speakers now, thought Alice. Not after she had had to cut her way out of one box, and not after Elwood had stunk up the other one. She pulled Duncan Skoro's Toyota van into the K-mart parking lot, parked it, then went around to the back and looked in at the two speaker cartons lying side by side. Two cardboard coffins. Now she had to go buy that shovel all over again.

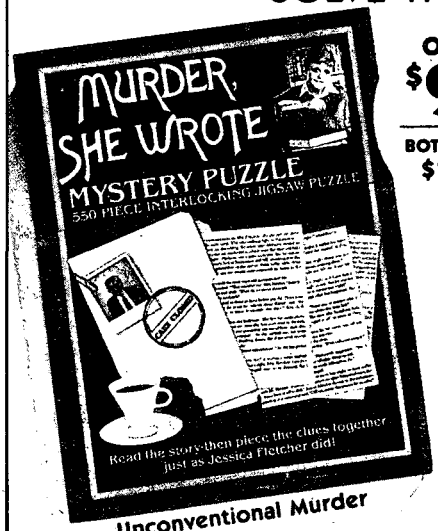
This time she locked all the doors.

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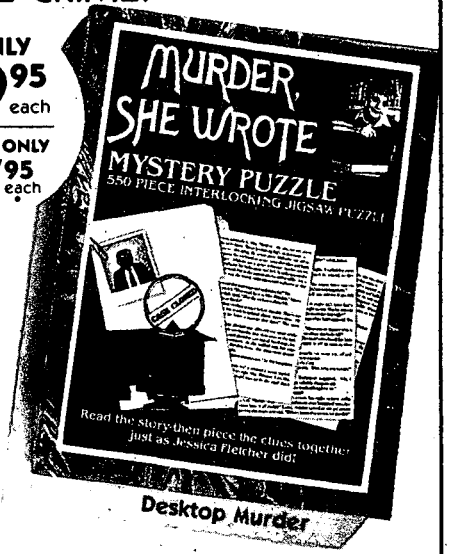
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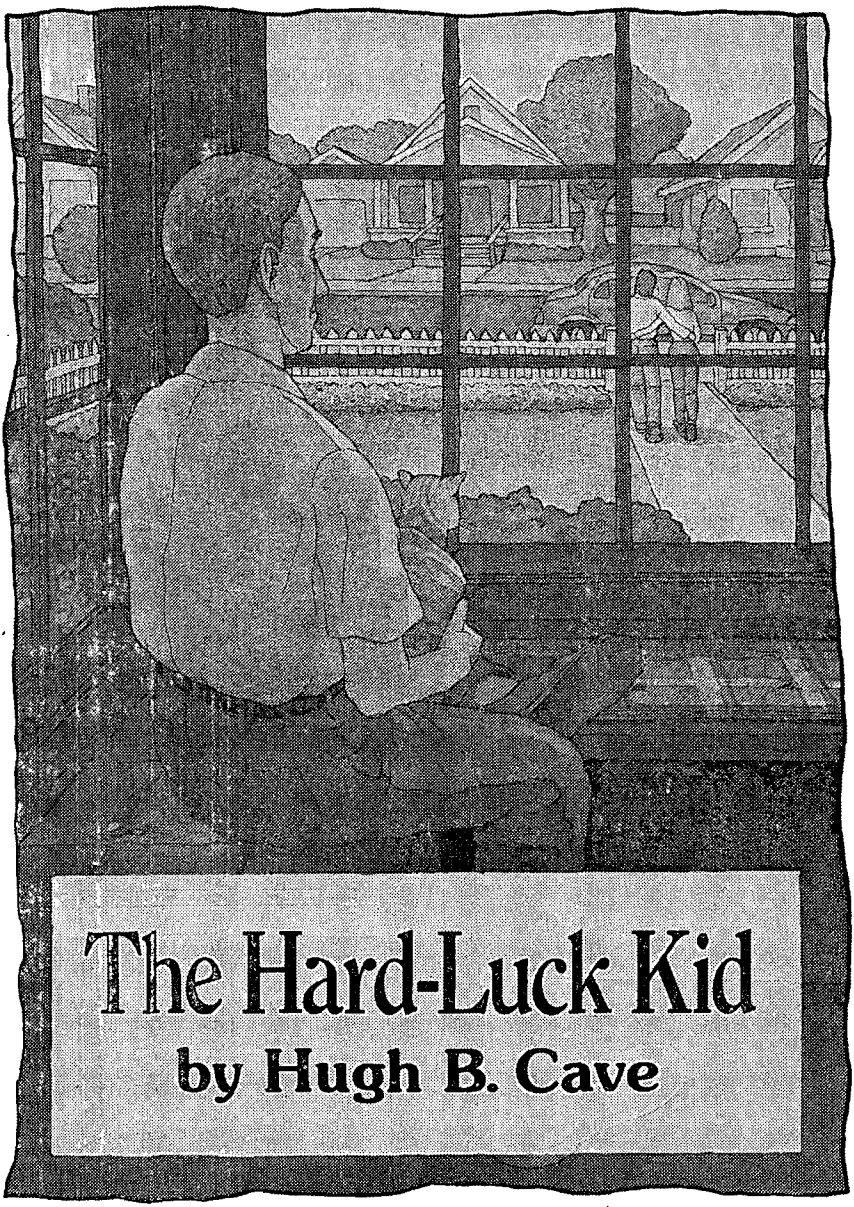
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FICTION



The Hard-Luck Kid

by Hugh B. Cave

Illustration by Jim Adams

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Almost from the beginning, Willie Elliot's luck was bad.

At the age of nine, seeing an aquarium in a pet shop, he saved his paper route money until he could afford one. Then he concocted a net out of cheesecloth and a coathanger, went to the local pond, and captured eleven small swimming things to put into it.

By week's end his aquarium had drawn half the kids in the neighborhood to the Elliots' rumpus room. Then on Monday morning he walked into that room and found it in pieces on the floor and his brother Joe's cat sitting there beside it, licking her chops.

Joe was a year older than Willie and always got top billing in the Elliot household. Ask their father Matthew about his two sons and he would say, "Well, now, they're both okay, of course, but Joe *is* better looking and smarter." Ask their mother Evelyn and she would say, "Well, we *planned* for Joe, you know. Willie was sort of an accident."

The cat that knocked over the aquarium and devoured its inhabitants that day was a reddish brown female tabby striped somewhat like a tiger. About six months old, she was called Miss Susie. Joe had seen her cavorting in the window of the same pet shop in which younger brother Willie had encountered the aquarium. "Hey, that's a neat cat!" Joe said. So, of course, his parents decided he adored animals and ought to have one for a pet.

Brother Willie, be it noted, had to acquire the aquarium with his own hard-earned money, but Joe got the cat as a gift.

As it happened, Joe lost interest in the cat in less than a week, so Willie was the one who fed her and kept her litterbox clean.

Willie got the short end of the stick again when he was fourteen and in high school. That year he discovered a bright, shiny trumpet in a pawnshop window and saw it as a magic means of becoming more popular. If he could teach himself to play it and get into the school band, hey, there was no telling what his future might be. A skinny, somewhat frail kid at that point, he hadn't a prayer of making the football team, on which brother Joe was already a hotshot quarterback. Nor, being somewhat on the homely side, was he anywhere near as popular with girls, who fluttered around Joe like hummingbirds at a feeder.

So with money saved from mowing neighbors' lawns and shoveling snow out of neighbors' driveways, Willie secretly bought the trumpet and a book on the art of trumpet playing and began practicing.

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Not openly, of course. He knew his parents would never stand for that. But any time his parents and brother were absent from the house, he would climb the pull-down stairs to the attic and snatch the instrument from its hiding place there and work on it. Usually he sat on an old ladderback chair under the single bare bulb that provided light to read the books by, and Miss Susie, following him up, would lie contentedly on an old discarded couch and adoringly watch him. She didn't seem to mind the sour notes. Not even in the beginning when they were pretty frequent.

But the very day Willie worked up courage enough to reveal his ownership of the trumpet and his intention of trying out for the band, he developed a sore lip. A lip so horrendously sore that Dr. Breckenridge, the family's physician, proclaimed trumpet playing forever out of bounds. And brother Joe, indifferently lifting the instrument to *his* lips, discovered *he* had the natural talent of a Louis Armstrong.

Joe had no desire to be in the band, of course. He was too busy being a football hero. But once more Willie had to resign himself to playing second fiddle.

So it went, again and again, down through the years. The only member of the Elliot household who seemed to understand Willie's feelings was Miss Susie. But that, Willie figured, was probably only because he was the one who always looked after her and took her to the vet when she wasn't feeling right. He always knew when she wasn't feeling right. She only had to look at him.

When Willie was nineteen, Miss Susie was ten and a half but, due to his unflagging care, was still as bright-eyed and bushy-tailed as a kitten. "If you were to bring her to me as a stray and ask me her age, I would probably guess four or five," the vet said one day, fondly patting Willie on the back. That was the year Willie fell in love.

A high school graduate now, he had a job selling used cars while brother Joe was in college on a football scholarship. The young lady came in one day to look at cars. Her name was—I'm sorry, but you'll have to accept the coincidence—her name was Susan. She actually introduced herself after Willie had talked to her awhile. "What's your name, anyway?" she said right out of the blue. "I mean—I'm Susan Wetherby."

"My name is Willie Elliot," said he, blushing.

He didn't sell her a car. In fact, he ended up whispering to her that nothing on the lot was really what she wanted. But he did

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take her to the movies that night. And so it began.

Right from the start Susan was a hit with the family, as well she should have been. The same age as Willie, she worked as a salesperson in a downtown department store and had deep blue eyes, lovely auburn hair, and a figure any model would have been proud of.

Most of all she was sweet and unsophisticated—exactly the right sort of girl for a man like Willie.

But one Sunday, six months later, just when Willie was on the verge of asking her to marry him, something happened. Susan was a regular at the Elliots' Sunday dinner table by then, and was expected. But half an hour before she arrived, while helping Mom in the kitchen, Dad suddenly clapped a hand to his chest, turned white as the fridge, and collapsed onto a chair.

"Matthew! What's the matter?" Mom cried in alarm, rushing over to him.

"My heart," he gasped. "I think it's my heart."

"Willie!" Mom cried. "Call Dr. Breckenridge!"

Willie did that, and the doctor wasted no words. "Take him to the hospital, Willie. I'll meet you there," he said briskly.

Of course Mom insisted on going, too. So brother Joe was at home alone when Susan arrived.

Dad's problem turned out to be nothing more serious than indigestion, but something happened in the Elliot home during the two hours Willie and his parents were absent. What it was, Willie never found out. But from that Sunday on, Susan was no longer exclusively Willie's girl.

Brother Joe began inviting himself along when they went places, like to a movie or the library, or even to McDonald's for a hamburger. Unfortunately, Joe was almost always around, too, because the college he attended was in the city and he lived at home.

After he got his degree and a job with a local but world-renowned high-tech research organization, Joe gradually took Willie's place as Susan's escort, and Willie was again second fiddle.

One night after the three of them had been to a basketball game and the brothers were back home, Joe walked into Willie's room without knocking and closed the door behind him. Mom and Dad were in the living room, watching an old Fred Astaire-Ginger Rogers movie on TV.

Willie had his pajamas on and was about to climb into bed. Joe, still dressed, walked over to a chair and straddled it backwards,

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with both arms draped along its top and a scowl on his handsome face. "Willie, we have to talk," he said.

"No, we don't," replied Willie. "Because I already know what you're going to say."

"Huh?"

"You want to take her away from me, don't you? You want to marry her."

"How'd you know?"

Willie only shrugged.

"Well, hey, kid, I'm sorry," Joe said. "But she fell in love with me and I couldn't stop her, y'know? I mean it just happened."

"And you want me to butt out," Willie said.

"Well, yeah. You know how it is."

"All right, I will."

Joe said. "Thanks, kid. You're a pal," and walked over to rumple Willie's hair before leaving the room. The door clicked shut behind him.

Miss Susie had been stretched out on Willie's bed while the brothers talked. Now, when Willie got into bed and reached up to turn off the lamp by which he usually read himself to sleep, the tiger-striped tabby did an unusual thing.

She had been sleeping with Willie for years, normally outside the covers at the foot of the bed, sort of snuggled up against Willie's feet. Tonight she walked up to the head of the bed, wormed herself in *under* the covers, and snuggled against his chest. As if she had understood every word.

When his tears at last stopped flowing, Willie fell asleep with one arm around her.

Susan—the other Susan—asked Willie's forgiveness the very next day. Walking into the used-car establishment where he worked, she tried to find words to explain what had happened. She hadn't meant to fall in love with Joe, she said. She hadn't wanted to. She still loved Willie and always would. "B-but I couldn't help myself," she stammered. "I don't know why, but I just couldn't."

Willie told her he understood. And, in a way, he did. After all, he'd been the underdog, the wannabe, the left-behind all his life, always stumbling along in brother Joe's shadow. What had happened wasn't her fault. "We can still be good friends," he said, kissing her on the cheek.

She told him she and Joe had set a wedding date. They were to be married September fifteenth, just short of two months away.

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"And Joe wants you to be best man, Willie dear," she said. "Will you? Please?"

"Do *you* want me to?" Willie asked.

"Well . . . yes. Of course."

"Okay," he said sadly. "If it's for you."

"And will you tell him, Willie?" she begged. "Will you tell him this evening?"

"I'll tell him," Willie promised.

Brother Joe was in the basement that evening when Willie reluctantly decided the time was right to keep his promise. He was in the rumpus room in which, years before, Miss Susie had knocked over the aquarium.

Since Joe's acquisition of a degree in advanced physics and his affiliation with the world-renowned research organization, that room had been radically altered. Joe had completely taken it over and transformed it into his personal workroom, all others kindly keep out. For months he had worked evenings on a mysterious project that no one else in the family was allowed to approach.

It just about covered the entire top of what had been the family ping-pong table, and resembled something in a science fiction movie.

Nearing the end of the project this evening, Joe made some final adjustments on two parts of the machine that resembled old fashioned telegraph keys, the kind that send out dots and dashes when tapped, except that one of these was bright red, the other green. Then he adjusted a tubelike arrangement that resembled a blowgun. And finally he walked down to the end of the table where stood a box of Kellogg's cornflakes.

Picking that up, he carried it a few steps farther and placed it on a folding metal chair which he then lined up with the blowgun thing.

"Come on now," he whispered fiercely. "Work!"

Back he went to the ping-pong table, where, after peering at the chair and the cornflakes box for a few seconds, he tapped the red key with a fingertip.

There followed a low buzzing sound, almost inaudible, that lasted—Joe timed it with the sweep-second hand on his wristwatch—for exactly seventeen seconds. When it ceased, the chair was no more than half an inch high and the box of cornflakes on it was no bigger than a speck of dust.

Joe strode to the chair and looked down at it for a few seconds

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but did not try to pick it up. Satisfied, he returned to his machine and pressed the green telegraph key.

Again the buzzing sound lasted exactly seventeen seconds. Then—presto!—the chair and the box of cereal on it were their old selves again.

"Hey, hey!" Joe exulted, clasping his hands over his head and leaping two feet off the floor. "Got it! At last!"

He tried again, this time with a game-winning football from a trophy case. After seventeen seconds the chair was reduced in size as before and the football became no bigger than a mustard seed, but both returned obediently to normal size when he touched the green key to restore them.

Then he took a black leather wallet from his pocket and placed *that* on the chair, not the least deterred by the fact that it contained over a hundred dollars in bills. And after reducing it to an object almost too small to be visible, his shrink machine successfully brought it back intact.

At that moment, while he was looking about for something else on which to test his invention, there came a knock on the lab door.

"Yes?" Joe said impatiently. "Who is it?"

"Me. Willie. May I come in?"

The words "No, I'm busy" got as far as the tip of Joe's tongue but no farther. A gleam came into his eyes. "Sure, Willie, if you want to," he said amiably.

The door opened and Willie stepped in, followed by Miss Susie. Joe saw the cat slink in between Willie's feet but was too excited to care. "What is it, Willie?" he asked. "Whatcha want, pal?"

"I'd like to talk, if you don't mind."

"Sure, buddy, why not?" Striding toward him, Joe put a hand on the kid brother's shoulder and turned him toward the chair on which he had placed the Kellogg's cornflakes, the football, and the wallet. "Sit down, Willie," he said. "What's on your mind?"

Willie obediently sat and began talking—about the wedding and how Susan had asked him to be best man. Nodding and saying things like "Uh-huh, sure, of course, Willie," Joe casually strolled back to the apparatus on the ping-pong table.

Standing there, he surreptitiously reached for the red button while saying, "Well, of *course* I want you to be best man, Willie! Who else would I even think of? You're my only brother, for God's sake."

His finger touched the red button and the buzzing began.

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Miss Susie, following the whole cunning procedure with her eyes and ears, at once voiced an ear-splitting shriek and launched herself. Like a Patriot missile fired at one of Saddam Hussein's Scuds, she slammed into Willie's chest and knocked him clean off the chair onto the floor. Knocked the chair over, too. All in mid-flight, so to speak, for she wound up a dozen feet away with her tail twice its normal thickness and her teeth gleaming in a snarl that would have done credit to a Bengal tiger.

With a "damn!" of utter disgust and annoyance, Joe left his place at the machine and strode forward to pick up the chair and put Willie back on it. The machine continued to buzz.

Thirteen seconds. Fourteen. Fifteen.

Joe reached the chair and leaned forward to grab it. Seven or eight feet away, Willie was still on the floor, too dazed from his fall to do more than lie there.

Sixteen.

Joe banged the chair down on its four legs, upright, and turned toward Willie.

Seventeen.

Both Joe and the chair were suddenly the size of figures in a doll house. A very small doll house. Very.

Willie at that moment was struggling to get to his feet. He did not see Miss Susie emerge from under the ping-pong table and pounce. He was making so much noise, he did not even hear the *crunch* as her jaws clicked shut. All he knew, when he got to his feet, was that the machine on the ping-pong table had stopped buzzing and his brother Joe had suddenly vanished, and that his beloved cat was sitting there beside a very tiny replica of the chair that he, Willie, had occupied a moment before.

And Miss Susie was licking her chops as she always did after a hearty meal.

No one ever solved the mystery of the disappearance of Joe Elliot. The papers ran stories on it. A TV program about unsolved mysteries did a segment on it. The producers of a well-known talk show even urged Willie and Susan—married by then—to appear on the show and discuss it, and the money they were paid helped them furnish their new home.

The general belief is that while Willie lay in a daze on the rumpus room floor, just after Miss Susie knocked him off his chair, Joe decided he did not want to marry Susan after all and seized that opportunity to take a walk. A long one.

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The day after Joe's disappearance Miss Susie, the tabby, seemed to have a problem of some kind with her digestion, and of course Willie took her to the vet. "If I didn't know you better, Willie," the vet said, "I'd have to guess you gave her something unsafe to eat like, say, some cat food that had gone bad. What really happened, probably, is that she ate a bug or something, as even the best of cats sometimes do." But Miss Susie got over it and is living happily now with Willie and Susan in their above-mentioned new home on the other side of town.

Not knowing what the apparatus on the ping-pong table was or what to do with it, Mr. and Mrs. Elliot eventually dismantled it and disposed of it for a few dollars at a garage sale. At the same time they sold the tiny chair for a quarter, not knowing what that was either.

Today, six months after Joe's disappearance, Susan teaches school and Willie still sells cars. But he sells new ones at a top-rated dealer's now, and displays a confidence that seems certain to win him an early promotion.

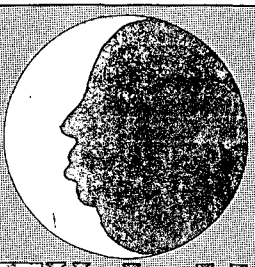
You never can tell, can you? As the poet John Gay once wrote:

Life is a jest, and all things show it;
I thought so once, but now I know it.

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MYSTERY CLASSIC

How Fear Departed from the Long Gallery

by E. F. Benson

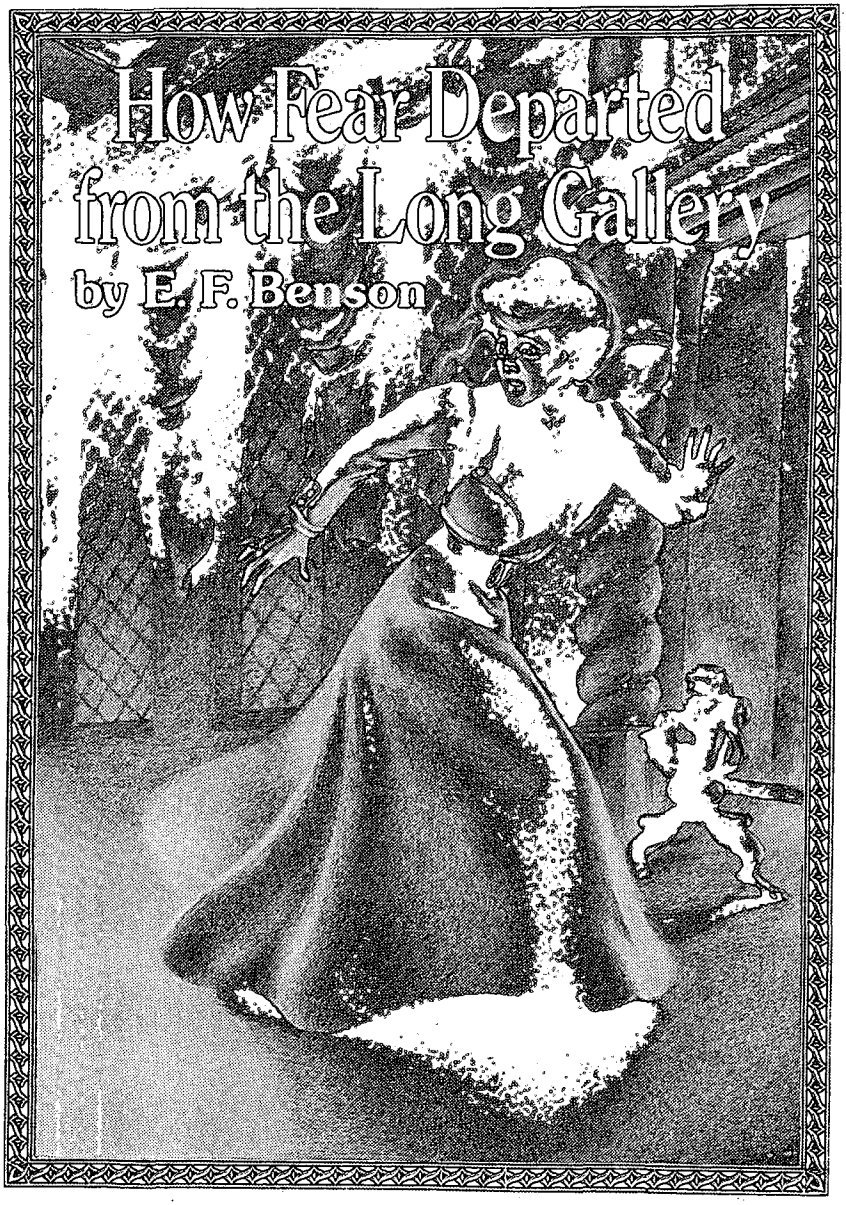


Illustration by Judy Mitchell

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Church-Peveril is a house so beset and frequented by spectres, both visible and audible, that none of the family which it shelters under its acre and a half of green copper roofs takes psychical phenomena with any seriousness. For to the Peverils the appearance of a ghost is a matter of hardly greater significance than the appearance of the post to those who live in more ordinary houses. It arrives, that is to say, practically every day, it knocks (or makes other noises), it is observed coming up the drive (or in other places). I myself, when staying there, have seen the present Mrs. Peveril, who is rather shortsighted, peer into the dusk while we were taking our coffee on the terrace after dinner and say to her daughter:

"My dear, was not that the Blue Lady who has just gone into the shrubbery? I hope she won't frighten Flo. Whistle for Flo, dear."

(Flo, it may be remarked, is the youngest and most precious of many dachshunds.)

Blanche Peveril gave a cursory whistle, and crunched the sugar left unmelted at the bottom of her coffee cup between her very white teeth. "Oh, darling, Flo isn't so silly as to mind," she said. "Poor Aunt Barbara is such a bore! Whenever I meet her she always looks as if she wanted to speak to me, but when I say, 'What is it, Aunt Barbara?' she never speaks but only points somewhere toward the house, which is so vague. I believe there was something she wanted to confess about two hundred years ago, but she has forgotten what it is."

Here Flo gave two or three short pleased barks, and came out of the shrubbery wagging her tail and capering round what appeared to me to be a perfectly empty space on the lawn.

"There! Flo has made friends with her," said Mrs. Peveril. "I wonder why she dresses in that very stupid shade of blue."

From this it may be gathered that even with regard to psychic phenomena there is some truth in the proverb that speaks of familiarity. But the Peverils do not exactly treat their ghosts with contempt, since most of that delightful family never despised anybody except such people as avowedly did not care for hunting or shooting, or golf or skating. And as all of their ghosts are of their family, it seems reasonable to suppose that they all, even the poor Blue Lady, excelled at one time in field sports. So far then they harbor no such unkindness or contempt, but only pity. Of one Peveril, indeed, who broke his neck in vainly attempting to ride up the

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main staircase on a thoroughbred mare after some monstrous and violent deed in the back garden, they are very fond, and Blanche comes downstairs in the morning with an eye unusually bright when she can announce that Master Anthony was "very loud" last night. He (apart from the fact of his having been so foul a ruffian) was a tremendous fellow across country, and they like these indications of the continuance of his superb vitality. In fact, it is supposed to be a compliment, when you go to stay at Church-Peveril, to be assigned a bedroom which is frequented by defunct members of the family. It means that you are worthy to look on the august and villainous dead, and you will find yourself shown into some vaulted or tapestried chamber, without benefit of electric light, and are told that Great-great-grandmamma Bridget occasionally has vague business by the fireplace, but it is better not to talk to her, and that you will hear Master Anthony "awfully well" if he attempts the front staircase any time before morning. There you are left for your night's repose and, having quakingly undressed, begin reluctantly to put out your candles. It is drafty in these great chambers, and the solemn tapestry swings and bellows and subsides, and the firelight dances on the forms of huntsmen and warriors and stern pursuits. Then you climb into your bed, a bed so huge that you feel as if the desert of Sahara was spread for you, and pray, like the mariners who sailed with St. Paul, for day. And all the time, you are aware that Freddy and Harry and Blanche and possibly even Mrs. Peveril are quite capable of dressing up and making disquieting tappings outside your door, so that when you open it some inconjecturable horror fronts you. For myself, I stick steadily to the assertion that I have an obscure valvular disease of the heart, and so sleep undisturbed in the new wing of the house where Aunt Barbara and Great-great-grandmamma Bridget and Master Anthony never penetrate. I forget the details of Great-great-grandmamma Bridget, but she certainly cut the throat of some distant relation before she disembowelled herself with the axe that had been used at Agincourt. Before that she had led a very sultry life, crammed with amazing incidents.

But there is one ghost at Church-Peveril at which the family never laugh, in which they feel no friendly and amused interest, and of which they only speak just as much as is necessary for the safety of their guests. More properly it should be described as two ghosts, for the "haunt" in question is that of two very young children who were twins. These, not without reason, the family take

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very seriously indeed. The story of them, as told me by Mrs. Peveril, is as follows:

In the year 1602, the same being the last of Queen Elizabeth's reign, a certain Dick Peveril was greatly in favor at court. He was brother to Master Joseph Peveril, then owner of the family house and lands, who two years previously, at the respectable age of seventy-four, became father of twin boys, firstborn of his progeny. It is known that the royal and ancient virgin had said to handsome Dick, who was nearly forty years his brother's junior, " 'Tis pity that you are not master of Church-Peveril," and these words probably suggested to him a sinister design. Be that as it may, handsome Dick, who very adequately sustained the family reputation for wickedness, set off to ride down to Yorkshire and found that, very conveniently, his brother Joseph had just been seized with an apoplexy, which appeared to be the result of a continued spell of hot weather combined with the necessity of quenching his thirst with an augmented amount of sack, and had actually died while handsome Dick, with God knows what thoughts in his mind, was journeying northwards. Thus it came about that he arrived at Church-Peveril just in time for his brother's funeral. It was with great propriety that he attended the obsequies and returned to spend a sympathetic day or two of mourning with his widowed sister-in-law, who was but a fainthearted dame, little fit to be mated with such hawks as these. On the second night of his stay, he did that which the Peverils regret to this day. He entered the room where the twins slept with their nurse and quietly strangled the latter as she slept. Then he took the twins and put them into the fire which warms the long gallery. The weather, which up to the day of Joseph's death had been so hot, had changed suddenly to bitter cold, and the fire was heaped high with burning logs and was exultant with flame. In the core of this conflagration he struck out a cremation chamber, and into that he threw the two children, stamping them down with his riding boots. They could just walk, but they could not walk out of that ardent place. It is said that he laughed as he added more logs. Thus he became master of Church-Peveril.

The crime was never brought home to him, but he lived no longer than a year in the enjoyment of his bloodstained inheritance. When he lay dying, he made his confession to the priest who attended him, but his spirit struggled forth from its fleshly coil before absolution could be given him. On that very night there began in

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Church-Peveril the haunting which to this day is but seldom spoken of by the family, and then only in low tones with serious mien. For, only an hour or two after handsome Dick's death, one of the servants passing the door of the long gallery heard from within peals of the loud laughter, so jovial and yet so sinister, which he had thought would never be heard in the house again. In a moment of that cold courage which is so nearly akin to mortal terror, he opened the door and entered, expecting to see he knew not what manifestation of him who lay dead in the room below. Instead he saw two little white-robed figures toddling towards him hand in hand across the moonlit floor.

The watchers in the room below ran upstairs, startled by the crash of his fallen body, and found him lying in the grip of some dread convulsion. Just before morning he regained consciousness and told his tale. Then pointing with trembling and ash-grey finger toward the door, he screamed aloud, and so fell back dead.

During the next fifty years this strange and terrible legend of the twin babies became fixed and consolidated. Their appearance, luckily for those who inhabited the house, was exceedingly rare, and during these years they seem to have been seen four or five times only. On each occasion they appeared at night, between sunset and sunrise, always in the same long gallery, and always as two toddling children scarcely able to walk. And on each occasion the luckless individual who saw them died either speedily or terribly, or with both speed and terror, after the accursed vision had appeared to him. Sometimes he might live for a few months: he was lucky if he died, as did the servant who first saw them, in a few hours. Vastly more awful was the fate of a certain Mrs. Canning who had the ill luck to see them in the middle of the next century, or to be quite accurate, in the year 1760. By this time the hours and the place of their appearance were well known, and as up till a year ago, visitors were warned not to go between sunset and sunrise into the long gallery.

But Mrs. Canning, a brilliantly clever and beautiful woman, admirer also and friend of the notorious skeptic M. Voltaire, wilfully went and sat night after night in spite of all protestations, in the haunted place. For four evenings she saw nothing, but on the fifth she had her will, for the door in the middle of the gallery opened, and there came toddling towards her the ill-omened, innocent little pair. It seemed that even then she was not frightened,

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but she thought good, poor wretch, to mock at them, telling them it was time for them to get back into the fire. They gave no word in answer but turned away from her, crying and sobbing. Immediately after they disappeared from her vision, she rustled downstairs to where the family and guests in the house were waiting for her, with the triumphant announcement that she had seen them both and must needs write to M. Voltaire, saying that she had spoken to spirits made manifest. It would make him laugh. But when some months later the whole news reached him he did not laugh at all.

Mrs. Canning was one of the great beauties of her day, and in the year 1760 she was at the height and zenith of her blossoming. The chief beauty, if it is possible to single out one point where all was so exquisite, lay in the dazzling color and incomparable brilliance of her complexion. She was now just thirty years of age but in spite of the excesses of her life retained the snow and roses of girlhood, and she courted the bright light of day which other women shunned, for it but showed to greater advantage the splendor of her skin. In consequence, she was very considerably dismayed one morning, about a fortnight after her strange experience in the long gallery, to observe on her left cheek an inch or two below her turquoise-colored eyes, a little greyish patch of skin, about as big as a threepenny piece. It was in vain that she applied her accustomed washes and unguents; vain, too, were the arts of her fardeuse and of her medical adviser. For a week she kept herself secluded, martyring herself with solitude and unaccustomed physics, and for result at the end of the week she had no amelioration to comfort herself with: instead, this woeful grey patch had doubled itself in size. Thereafter the nameless disease, whatever it was, developed in new and terrible ways. From the center of the discolored place there sprouted forth little lichen-like tendrils of greenish-grey, and another patch appeared on her lower lip. This, too, soon vegetated, and one morning on opening her eyes to the horror of the new day, she found that her vision was strangely blurred. She sprang to her looking glass, and what she saw caused her to shriek aloud with horror. From under her upper eyelid a fresh growth had sprung up, mushroomlike, in the night, and its filaments extended downwards, screening the pupil of her eye. Soon after her tongue and throat were attacked: the air passages became obstructed, and death by suffocation was merciful after such suffering.

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More terrible yet was the case of a certain Colonel Blantyre who fired at the children with his revolver. What he went through is not to be recorded here.

It is this haunting, then, that the Peverils take quite seriously, and every guest on his arrival in the house is told that the long gallery must not be entered after nightfall on any pretext whatever. By day, however, it is a delightful room and intrinsically merits description, apart from the fact that the due understanding of its geography is necessary for the account that here follows. It is full eighty feet in length, and is lit by a row of six tall windows looking over the gardens at the back of the house. A door communicates with the landing at the top of the main staircase, and about halfway down the gallery in the wall facing the windows is another door communicating with the back staircase and servants' quarters, and thus the gallery forms a constant place of passage for them in going to the rooms on the first landing. It was through this door that the baby-figures came when they appeared to Mrs. Canning, and on several other occasions they have been known to make their entry here, for the room out of which handsome Dick took them lies just beyond at the top of the back stairs. Farther on again in the gallery is the fireplace into which he thrust them, and at the far end a large box window looks straight down the avenue. Above this fireplace, there hangs with grim significance a portrait of handsome Dick, in the insolent beauty of early manhood, attributed to Holbein, and a dozen other portraits of great merit face the windows. During the day this is the most frequented sitting room in the house, for its other visitors never appear there then, nor does it then ever resound with the harsh jovial laugh of handsome Dick which sometimes, after dark has fallen, is heard by passersby on the landing outside. But Blanche does not grow bright-eyed when she hears it: she shuts her ears and hastens to put a greater distance between her and the sound of that atrocious mirth.

But during the day the long gallery is frequented by many occupants, and much laughter in no wise sinister or saturnine resounds there. When summer lies hot over the land, those occupants lounge in the deep window seats, and when winter spreads his icy fingers and blows shrilly between his frozen palms, congregate around the fireplace at the far end, and perch, in companies of cheerful chatterers, upon sofa and chair, and chairback and floor. Often have I sat there on long August evenings up till dressing time, but

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never have I been there when anyone has seemed disposed to linger overlate without hearing the warning: "It is close on sunset: shall we go?" Later on in the shorter autumn days they often have tea laid there, and sometimes it has happened that, even while merriment was most uproarious, Mrs. Peveril has suddenly looked out of the window and said, "My dears, it is getting so late: let us finish our nonsense downstairs in the hall." And then for a moment a curious hush always falls on loquacious family and guests alike, and as if some bad news had just been known, we all make our silent way out of the place. But the spirits of the Peverils (of the living ones, that is to say) are the most mercurial imaginable, and the blight which the thought of handsome Dick and his doings casts over them passes away again with amazing rapidity.

A typical party, large, young, and peculiarly cheerful, was staying at Church-Peveril shortly after Christmas last year, and as usual on December thirty-first, Mrs. Peveril was giving her annual New Year's Eve ball. The house was quite full, and she had commandeered as well the greater part of the Peveril Arms to provide sleeping quarters for the overflow from the house. For some days past a black and windless frost had stopped all hunting, but it is an ill windlessness that blows no good (if so mixed a metaphor may be forgiven), and the lake below the house had for the last day or two been covered with an adequate and admirable sheet of ice. Everyone in the house had been occupied all the morning of that day in performing swift and violent maneuvers on the elusive surface, and as soon as lunch was over we all, with one exception, hurried out again. This one exception was Madge Dalrymple, who had had the misfortune to fall rather badly earlier in the day, but hoped, by resting her injured knee, instead of joining the skaters again, to be able to dance that evening. The hope, it is true, was of the most sanguine sort, for she could but hobble ignobly back to the house, but with the breezy optimism which characterizes the Peverils (she is Blanche's first cousin), she remarked that it would be but tepid enjoyment that she could, in her present state, derive from further skating, and thus she sacrificed little but might gain much.

Accordingly, after a rapid cup of coffee which was served in the long gallery, we left Madge comfortably reclined on the big sofa at right angles to the fireplace, with an attractive book to beguile the tedium till tea. Being of the family, she knew all about handsome

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Dick and the babies, and the fate of Mrs. Canning and Colonel Blantyre, but as we went out I heard Blanche say to her, "Don't run it too fine, dear," and Madge had replied, "No, I'll go away well before sunset." And so we left her alone in the long gallery.

Madge read her attractive book for some minutes, but failing to get absorbed in it, put it down and limped across to the window. Though it was still but little after two, it was but a dim and uncertain light that entered, for the crystalline brightness of the morning had given place to a veiled obscurity produced by flocks of thick clouds which were coming sluggishly up from the northeast. Already the whole sky was overcast with them, and occasionally a few snowflakes fluttered waveringly down past the long windows. From the darkness and bitter cold of the afternoon, it seemed to her that there was like to be a heavy snowfall before long, and these outward signs were echoed inwardly in her by that muffled drowsiness of the brain which to those who are sensitive to the pressures and lightness of weather portends storms. Madge was peculiarly the prey of such external influences: to her a brisk morning gave an ineffable brightness and briskness of spirit, and correspondingly the approach of heavy weather produced a somnolence in sensation that both drowsed and depressed her.

It was in such mood as this that she limped back again to the sofa beside the log fire. The whole house was comfortably heated by waterpipes, and though the fire of logs and peat, an adorable mixture, had been allowed to burn low, the room was very warm. Idly she watched the dwindling flames, not opening her book again but lying on the sofa with face toward the fireplace, intending drowsily and not immediately to go to her own room and spend the hours, until the return of the skaters made gaiety in the house again, in writing one or two neglected letters. Still drowsily she began thinking over what she had to communicate: one letter several days overdue should go to her mother, who was immensely interested in the psychical affairs of the family. She would tell her how Master Anthony had been prodigiously active on the staircase a night or two ago, and how the Blue Lady, regardless of the severity of the weather, had been seen by Mrs. Peveril that morning, strolling about. It was rather interesting: the Blue Lady had gone down the laurel walk and had been seen by her to enter the stables, where, at the moment, Freddy Peveril was inspecting the frostbound hunters. Identically then, a sudden panic had spread

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through the stables, and the horses had whinnied and kicked, and shied, and sweated. Of the fatal twins nothing had been seen for many years past, but as her mother knew, the Peverils never used the long gallery after dark.

Then for a moment she sat up, remembering that she was in the long gallery now. But it was still but a little after half-past two, and if she went to her room in half an hour, she would have ample time to write this and another letter before tea. Till then she would read her book. But she found she had left it on the windowsill, and it seemed scarcely worthwhile to get it. She felt exceedingly drowsy.

The sofa where she lay had been lately recovered, in a greyish green shade of velvet, somewhat the color of lichen. It was of very thick, soft texture, and she luxuriously stretched her arms out, one on each side of her body, and pressed her fingers into the nap. How horrible that story of Mrs. Canning was: the growth on her face was the color of lichen. And then without further transition or blurring of thought Madge fell asleep.

She dreamed. She dreamed that she awoke and found herself exactly where she had gone to sleep, and in exactly the same attitude. The flames from the logs had burned up again and leaped on the walls, fitfully illuminating the picture of handsome Dick above the fireplace. In her dream she knew exactly what she had done today, and for what reason she was lying here now instead of being out with the rest of the skaters. She remembered also (still dreaming) that she was going to write a letter or two before tea, and prepared to get up in order to go to her room. As she half rose she caught sight of her own arms lying out on each side of her on the grey velvet sofa. But she could not see where her hands ended, and where the grey velvet began: her fingers seemed to have melted into the stuff. She could see her wrists quite clearly, and a blue vein on the backs of her hands, and here and there a knuckle. Then, in her dream, she remembered the last thought which had been in her mind before she fell asleep, namely the growth of the lichen-colored vegetation on the face and the eyes and the throat of Mrs. Canning. At that thought the strangling terror of real nightmare began: she knew that she was being transformed into this grey stuff, and she was absolutely unable to move. Soon the grey would spread up her arms and over her feet; when they came in from skating they would find here nothing but a huge misshapen cushion of lichen-colored velvet, and that would be she. The horror

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grew more acute, and then by a violent effort she shook herself free of the clutches of this very evil dream, and she awoke.

For a minute or two she lay there, conscious only of the tremendous relief at finding herself awake. She felt again with her fingers the pleasant touch of the velvet, and drew them backwards and forwards, assuring herself that she was not, as her dream had suggested, melting into greyness and softness. But she was still, in spite of the violence of her awakening, very sleepy, and lay there till, looking down, she was aware that she could not see her hands at all. It was very nearly dark.

At that moment a sudden flicker of flame came from the dying fire, and a flare of burning gas from the peat flooded the room. The portrait of handsome Dick looked evilly down on her, and her hands were visible again. And then a panic worse than the panic of her dreams seized her. Daylight had altogether faded, and she knew that she was alone in the dark and terrible gallery. The panic was of the nature of nightmare, for she felt unable to move for terror. But it was worse than nightmare because she knew she was awake. And then the full cause of this frozen fear dawned on her; she knew with the certainty of absolute conviction that she was about to see the twin babies.

She felt a sudden moisture break out on her face, and within her mouth her tongue and throat went suddenly dry, and she felt her tongue grate along the inner surface of her teeth. All power of movement had slipped from her limbs, leaving them dead and inert, and she stared with wide eyes into the blackness. The spurt of flame from the peat had burned itself out again, and darkness encompassed her.

Then on the wall opposite her, facing the windows, there grew a faint light of dusky crimson. For a moment she thought it but heralded the approach of the awful vision, then hope revived in her heart, and she remembered that thick clouds had overcast the sky before she went to sleep, and guessed that this light came from the sun not yet quite sunk and set. This sudden revival of hope gave her the necessary stimulus, and she sprang off the sofa where she lay. She looked out of the window and saw the dull glow on the horizon. But before she could take a step forward it was obscured again. A tiny sparkle of light came from the hearth which did not more than illuminate the tiles of the fireplace, and snow falling heavily tapped at the window panes. There was neither light nor sound except these.

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But the courage that had come to her, giving her the power of movement, had not quite deserted her, and she began feeling her way down the gallery. And then she found that she was lost. She stumbled against a chair, and, recovering herself, stumbled against another. Then a table barred her way, and, turning swiftly aside, she found herself up against the back of the sofa. Once more she turned and saw the dim gleam of the firelight on the side opposite to that on which she expected it. In her blind gropings she must have reversed her direction. But which way was she to go now? She seemed blocked in by furniture. And all the time insistent and imminent was the fact that the two innocent terrible ghosts were about to appear to her.

Then she began to pray, "Lighten our darkness, O Lord," she said to herself. But she could not remember how the prayer continued, and she had sore need of it. There was something about the perils of the night. All this time she felt about her with groping, fluttering hands. The fire-glimmer which should have been on her left was on her right again; therefore she must turn herself round again. "Lighten our darkness," she whispered, and then aloud she repeated, "Lighten our darkness."

She stumbled up against a screen, and could not remember the existence of any such screen. Hastily she felt beside it with blind hands, and touched something soft and velvety. Was it the sofa on which she had lain? If so, where was the head of it? It had a head and a back and feet—it was like a person, all covered with grey lichen. Then she lost her head completely. All that remained to her was to pray; she was lost, lost in this awful place, where no one came in the dark except the babies that cried. And she heard her voice rising from whisper to speech, and speech to scream. She shrieked out the holy words, she yelled them as if blaspheming as she groped among tables and chairs and the pleasant things of ordinary life which had become so terrible.

Then came a sudden and awful answer to her screamed prayer. Once more a pocket of inflammable gas in the peat on the hearth was reached by the smoldering embers, and the room started into light. She saw the evil eyes of handsome Dick, she saw the little ghostly snowflakes falling thickly outside. And she saw where she was, just opposite the door through which the terrible twins made their entrance. Then the flame went out again, and left her in blackness once more. But she had gained something, for she had her geography now. The center of the room was bare of furniture,

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and one swift dart would take her to the door of the landing above the main staircase and into safety. In that gleam she had been able to see the handle of the door, bright-brassed, luminous like a star. She would go straight for it; it was but a matter of a few seconds now.

She took a long breath, partly of relief, partly to satisfy the demands of her galloping heart. But the breath was only half taken when she was stricken once more into the immobility of nightmare.

There came a little whisper, it was no more than that, from the door opposite which she stood, and through which the twin babies entered. It was not quite dark outside, for she could see that the door was opening. And there stood in the opening two little white figures, side by side. They came towards her slowly, shufflingly. She could not see face or form at all distinctly, but the two little white figures were advancing. She knew them to be the ghosts of terror, innocent of the awful doom they were bound to bring, even as she was innocent. With the inconceivable rapidity of thought, she made up her mind what to do. She had not hurt them or laughed at them, and they, they were but babies when the wicked and bloody deed had sent them to their burning death. Surely the spirits of these children would not be inaccessible to the cry of one who was of the same blood as they, who had committed no fault that merited the doom they brought. If she entreated them they might have mercy, they might forbear to bring the curse upon her, they might allow her to pass out of the place without blight, without the sentence of death, or the shadow of things worse than death upon her.

It was but for the space of a moment that she hesitated, then she sank down onto her knees and stretched out her hands towards them.

"Oh, my dears," she said, "I only fell asleep. I have done no more wrong that that—"

She paused a moment, and her tender girl's heart thought no more of herself, but only of them, those little innocent spirits on whom so awful a doom was laid, that they should bring death where other children bring laughter, and doom for delight. But all those who had seen them before had dreaded and feared them, or had mocked at them.

Then, as the enlightenment of pity dawned on her, her fear fell from her like the wrinkled sheath that holds the sweet folded buds of spring.

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"Dears, I am so sorry for you," she said. "It is not your fault that you must bring me what you must bring, but I am not afraid any longer. I am only sorry for you. God bless you, you poor darlings."

She raised her head and looked at them. Though it was so dark, she could now see their faces, though all was dim and wavering, like the light of pale flames shaken by a draft. But the faces were not miserable or fierce—they smiled at her with shy little baby smiles. And as she looked they grew faint, fading slowly away like wreaths of vapor in frosty air.

Madge did not at once move when they had vanished, for instead of fear there was wrapped round her a wonderful sense of peace, so happy and serene that she would not willingly stir, and so perhaps disturb it. But before long she got up, and feeling her way, but without any sense of nightmare pressing her on, or frenzy of fear to spur her, she went out of the long gallery, to find Blanche just coming upstairs whistling and swinging her skates.

"How's the leg, dear?" she asked. "You're not limping any more."

Till that moment Madge had not thought of it.

"I think it must be all right," she said. "I had forgotten it anyhow. Blanche, dear, you won't be frightened for me, will you, but—I have seen the twins."

For a moment Blanche's face whitened with terror.

"What?" she said in a whisper.

"Yes, I saw them just now. But they were kind, they smiled at me, and I was so sorry for them. And somehow I am sure I have nothing to fear."

It seems that Madge was right, for nothing untoward has come to her. Something, her attitude to them, we must suppose, her pity, her sympathy, touched and dissolved and annihilated the curse. Indeed, I was at Church-Peveril only last week, arriving there after dark. Just as I passed the gallery door, Blanche came out.

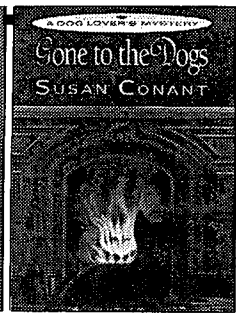
"Ah, there you are," she said. "I've just been seeing the twins. They looked too sweet and stopped nearly ten minutes. Let us have tea at once."

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by Carol Harper





"Dog people make good street cops . . . but only cat people make good investigative detectives. It had to do with interpretation of behavior. With dogs, everything was hands-on or paws-on. . . .

"With cats it was different. To know your cat's feelings is to interpret its behavior, to have to rely on clues, on interpretation of past facts and past complexes of facts, none of which were mathematically precise."

True or false? I suspect that your response will depend upon your affinity to dogs *(false!)* or cats (of course it's *true!)*. And I must admit that the above quote is cheating a bit—it is from one installment of a series about a cat-sitting actress who uses cats as clues when she detects crimes. I refer to Lydia Adamson's Alice Nestleton series—*A Cat in the Manger* (November, 1990), *A Cat of a Different Color* (May, 1991), *A Cat in Wolf's Clothing* (November, 1991), *A Cat by Any Other Name* (April, 1992), and the forthcoming *A Cat in the Wings,* all published as paperback originals by Signet Mystery, ranging in price from $3.95 to $3.99. The heroine of the series is definitely biased towards cats. She owns two—Bushy, an egocentric Maine Coon, and Pancho, a tailless, scarred, and paranoid rescue from the SPCA—and she makes her living, between obscure parts in even more obscure plays, as a cat-sitter for the many doting cat owners in New York City.

Alice became embroiled in amateur detection (*A Cat in the Manger*) when she went to Long Island to cat-sit eight Himalayans owned by her old

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friends Harry and Jo Starobin. Alice had met the Starobins when she solved the suicide-cum-murder (which happened prior to the series) of an acquaintance, and then felt obliged to place the victim's two cats in a good home. The Starobins found the home for the cats and hired Alice as a cat-sitter around the Christmas holidays. Alice, however, did not expect to find Harry hanging from a door in the cottage where she was to stay.

A Cat of a Different Color involves the murder of an actor/student who appeared to have an unwelcome crush on Alice, and who appeared to have given unusual cats to all his girlfriends.

In *A Cat in Wolf's Clothing,* Alice gains acceptance by the NYPD, albeit temporary, when she is hired as a consultant in a series of killings in which a catnip mouse is left beside each body.

Alice calls on the NYPD connections in *A Cat by Any Other Name* in order to solve the suicide (suspicious) and murder (obvious) of a couple who were involved in the same catnip growing enterprise as Alice. Again there are cats—all the suspects have cats, ranging from alley to purebred. And of course the catnip garden becomes a clue. But cats seem less central to the plot here and in *A Cat in the Wings* than in the previous books of the series. *A Cat in the Wings* begins at the Christmas performance of *The Nutcracker,* and it appears to be Alice's connections with the theater world that introduce her to murder in this story.

At any rate, Alice makes good use of her knowledge of cat behavior, cat owners' personalities, and a subculture that dotes on cats to detect crimes, many of which are obscure, identified as accidents or suicides rather than murder.

Susan Conant has a series starring Holly Winter, dog trainer, columnist for *Dog's Life* magazine, and amateur detective: *A New Leash on Death* (September, 1990), *Dead and Doggone* (December, 1990), *A Bite of Death* (April, 1991), *Paws Before Dying* (August, 1991), *Gone to the Dogs* (July, 1992), and *Bloodlines* (scheduled for release December, 1992). Billed as Dog Lover's Mysteries, the first four were published as paperback originals by Charter/Diamond ($3.50) and the fifth and sixth are being published in hardcover by Doubleday Perfect Crime ($16.50). Holly's employment, while not lucrative, is fully involved in the dog world. Her dogs are Rowdy and Kimi, male and female malamutes, respectively; Rowdy is unusual

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in that he is, for a malamute, perfectly trained.

Holly is introduced to detection while trying to locate Rowdy's papers in *A New Leash on Death*. She isn't the original owner, or even the original trainer, of Rowdy. She became Rowdy's "alpha female" when his previous owner, Dr. Stanton, was strangled by his leash on the grounds of the Cambridge, Massachusetts, armory where the regular Thursday night dog obedience classes were being held. Of course her search gets more complicated, thanks in part to living next door to Kevin Dennehy, a Cambridge police lieutenant, who gives her something of an inside track on the investigation of Dr. Stanton's murder.

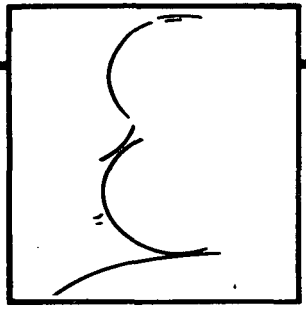
In *Dead and Doggone,* it is a dog trainer and owner of champion pointers who is killed. In *A Bite of Death,* a psychiatrist is murdered—a psychiatrist who turns out to be more of a harm to her patients than a help, and one who owns dogs, of course. A retired kindergarten teacher (also a dog owner) is murdered in *Paws Before Dying,* and in *Gone to the Dogs,* a veterinarian disappears. Advance publicity has Holly investigating the death of a pet store owner in *Bloodlines*. It is Rowdy, and eventually Kimi, who often lead Holly to the killers and to the secrets in the lives of the many suspects in the cases.

It would appear, then, that Holly uses clues derived from dog behavior, the code of behavior of dog owners, and the dog owner subculture to lead her into murder and the subsequent solutions, techniques similar to those used by Alice. Also, she has parallel assistance in the form of her lover Steve (compared with Alice's friend and sometime lover Tony Basillio, set designer) and her neighbor Kevin (as compared to Alice's NYPD friends). Perhaps Holly's dogs are more intimately involved in the crimes than Alice's cats; certainly, they participate more actively than the cats, providing more direct clues to the crime, the motive, and the murderers. Sometimes the cats in the Adamson series seem to be more of a background device, or even objects to be stolen, than actual participants in the detection. Cats offer less protection to Alice than Rowdy does to Holly, leaving Alice more vulnerable to last minute danger and rescue by her friends. Finally, Alice has as much entree to detection via her connections in the theater world as through her cat-sitting, but Holly's connections are more solidly and exclusively in the dog world; there is no "outside" interest to involve her.

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MURDER BY DIRECTION

by William Heller



When a couple of young marrieds who seem to have it all find their secure and comfortable lifestyle threatened by a knife-wielding burglar, they are thankful for the more than helpful police officer who comes to their aid.

Michael Carr (Kurt Russell), the head of this household, says he'll buy a gun to protect himself and his beautiful wife Karen (Madeleine Stowe). But LAPD officer Pete Davis—a blue-collar kind of guy who seems to aspire to everything the Carrs have—tells him, "Forget about guns. The wrong people always get hurt." Instead, he recommends a state of the art security system. The next day, off duty, of course, who should show up at the Carr home to supervise the installation of said security system, but Pete Davis himself, looking good in tight jeans, black leather jacket, and cowboy boots.

By this point in **Unlawful Entry,** you'll probably experience at least a twinge of suspicion over why the friendly cop is so friendly, unless of course you're Michael or Karen Carr.

Michael is a clean-cut, hard-working husband trying to make his mark as a developer.

Pete Davis, also clean-cut, is a much-honored officer. He spends his free time restoring a black Dodge Charger, sort of a low-rent classic. Unfortunately for the Carrs, Pete turns out to be a low-rent kind of guy. Actually, more of a psycho.

He's so nice to the couple, and so concerned for their safety, he starts hanging around the house. At first they're happy to see him and invite him for a backyard barbecue. Everything is cosy in

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our little triangle until one night when the cop invites Michael for what he calls a ride-along, to see what a cop's beat is like from the back seat of a black and white. At first it consists mostly of bad Mexican food. But when Pete drops his partner (Roger E. Mosley) off and takes Michael for a visit to the perp who broke into the Carr house, all bets are off.

Although Michael had boasted of what he would do if he ever saw the man who held a knife to his wife's throat, he finds himself unable to do the job. His cop friend, however, has no such compunctions, whips out his nightstick, and pulls a "Rodney King" all by himself on the cowering man. That scene makes you cringe.

At this point Michael finally begins to get the picture.

But that leaves the naive and attractive Karen.

The final stages of the hour-and-fifty-minute film are more action-packed than the more plodding first part.

Pete wants Karen, thinks she wants him, and nothing will stand in his way.

While early in the film what will happen is apparent, the ride to the finish line is fun. Despite the plot's predictability, *Unlawful Entry* has a sense of humor.

When Michael's lawyer, played with a schlumpy perfection by Ken Lerner, is pulled over in a police chase, he steps out of the car with his hands up, calling out, "Don't shoot, I'm a lawyer."

In another funny scene, during a business meeting between Michael, his lawyer, and an investor, a telephone ring prompts all three to reach for their portable phones.

The acting is first-rate. Ray Liotta is a psychotic and a half here. But he works his way into it gradually. He's got intense eyes, an awkward, tight-lipped smile, and quite a pair of dimples.

Kurt Russell, who started as a child star in Disney movies, looks like a Disney kid grown up, like the kind of man you'd want your daughter to marry. He's very suitable for his role as a man who finds his nice little life threatened and needs to grow up to save it.

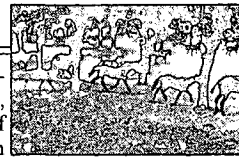
Madeleine Stowe's role is basically a supportive one, and she supports well.

Roger E. Mosley, from TV's *Magnum, P.I.*, is Pete's well-intentioned partner and does what he can with an unfortunately minimal role.

Along with *Pacific Heights*, which also sees a successful young couple threatened by what appears at first to be an unthreatening friend, *Unlawful Entry* may herald a new film genre—the yuppie thriller.

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THE STORY THAT WON



The June Mysterious Photograph contest was won by Jan Streilein of Johnstown, Pennsylvania. Honorable mentions go to Ed Bird of Campbell River, British Columbia, Canada; Josh Logan of Federal Way, Washington; Lois Glovsky of Ashland, Wisconsin; Walter Patrick Smith of Penn Valley, California; Stuart Brynien of Brooklyn, New York; Joy Hewitt Mann of Spencerville, Ontario, Canada; Joy L. Riggleman of Midwest City, Oklahoma; Victor P. Dufault of Noank, Connecticut; William F. Smith of Garden Grove, California; Norman E. Glovsky of Ashland, Wisconsin; and Pat Healy of Novato, California.

Photo by Josef Koudelka/Magnum

WHOA! by Jan Streilein

"You're right on time, sheriff. Take a look out back, and you'll see it's just like I told you."

"There must be a dozen of them. You say this happens every day around noon?"

"Regular as clockwork. At first I thought it was rustlers, but it's as though someone has a schedule to stampede the herd."

"Are there any riders?"

"No. And another thing, I never see any of them coming back. It's like they're going around in a circle every twenty-four hours."

"Are you sure it's the same horses?"

"Of course I'm sure. Horses are as individual as people."

"Don't get your dander up, Clay. I'm just trying to get some information. Did you ever follow them?"

"I tried twice, but they pick up speed and then disappear."

"You mean they run out of sight before you can catch up."

"I was in my truck the second time. I mean exactly what I said. They disappeared."

"How about where they're coming from? Did you ever check that out between laps to see if you could turn them around?"

"I only did that once. Me and the dog waited and waited. Then, out of nowhere, they came galloping towards the orchard. Buster hasn't left the back porch since."

"So what do you want me to do, get a posse and arrest them for trespassing?"

"Catch them. They're stealing my apples. Then you can hang them. They're horse thieves."

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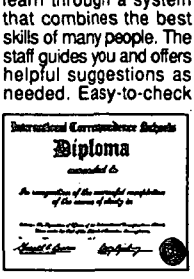
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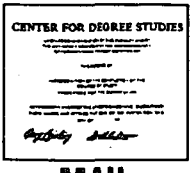
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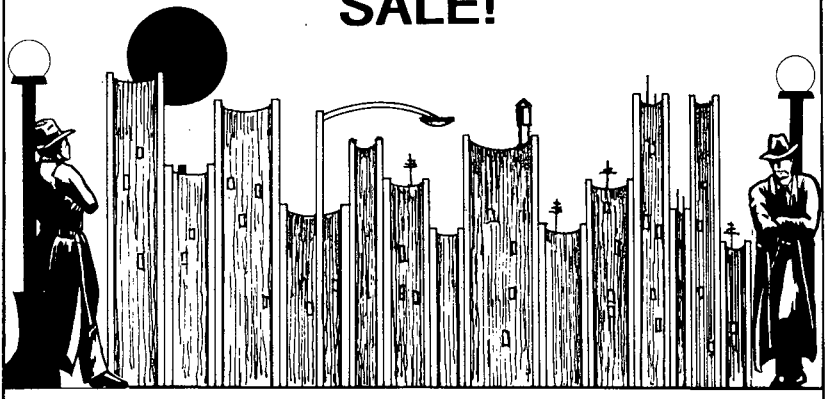
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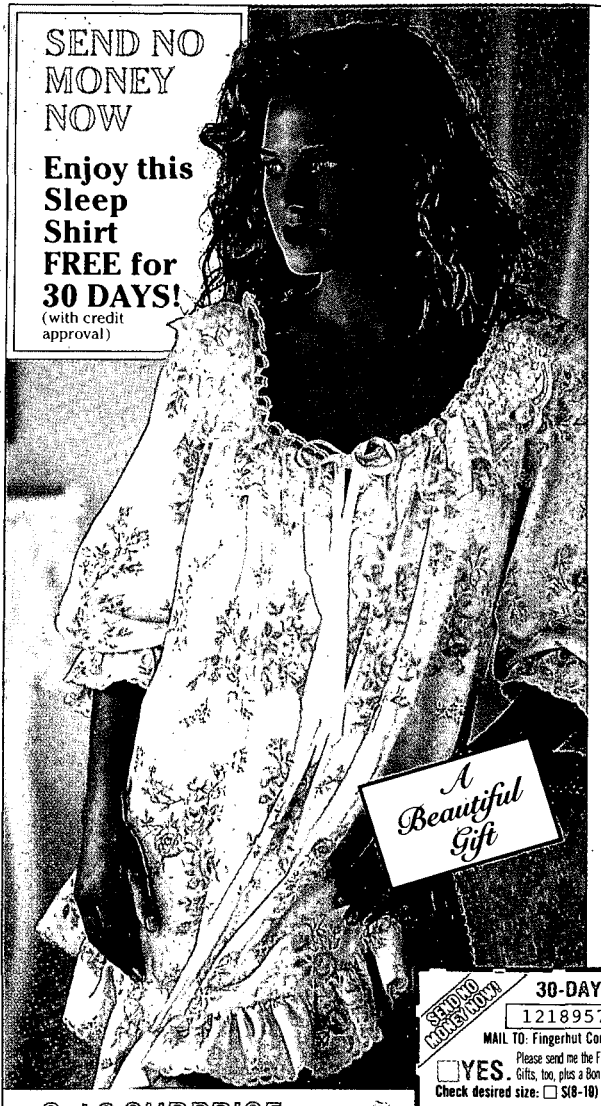
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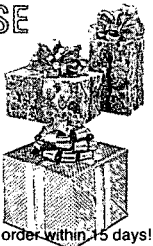
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